

Analysing Archetypes in the Modern Retelling of Greek Mythology Through Select Works of Madeline Miller

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Abstract

Archetypes in literary criticism are sequences of circumstances that occur in a repetitive manner to such a degree that the recurring circumstances are categorised for recognition. The objective of the study is to analyse the archetypal characteristics exhibited in the key figures of *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe*; chiefly, Circe, Patroclus and Achilles. The research examines these archetypal reflections qualitatively. This research primarily focuses on how contemporary retellings of Greek mythologies exhibit the Jungian Archetypes proposed by Carl Jung, a prominent psychologist. The study displays the occurrence of the archetypes, such as The Hero, The Outlaw, The Shadow, The Self, The Anima/Animus, and The Persona, predominantly. This research reinstates the relevance of archetypes in the contemporary adaptive retelling of the Greek mythologies, proving that archetypes help provide recognition of circumstances, inculcating a sense of familiarity.

Keywords: archetypes, Jungian archetypes, Circe, Anima/Animus, The Hero, The Shadow, The Self, The Caregiver, Achilles, Patroclus, Carl Jung.

Archetypes are recurring patterns that occur in myths and literature of all sorts, across various cultures that are classified for recognition and they provide a framework to understand the characters better. Carl Jung, a Swiss psychologist and a prominent figure in the field of archetypes, states, “The primordial image, or archetype, is a figure be it a daemon, a human being, or a process - that constantly recurs in the course of history and appears wherever creative fantasy is freely expressed” (Jung).

The Song of Achilles written by Madeline Miller is a poignant retelling of the Greek myth of the Trojan War. It also explores the complexities in the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus. Achilles, a demigod and son of King Peleus and a sea nymph, Thetis, crosses paths with the awkward exiled son of Menoetias, Patroclus and they form a very interesting bond. When Helen of Sparta is kidnapped, all the Greek warriors are called to war. Being the greatest of all Greek warriors, Achilles is called, and Patroclus follows him. The fate tests them both with cruelty, and they struggle tremendously. It exhibits the transformation of both Achilles and Patroclus, the loss of innocence and their deep affection that goes beyond death.

Circe, the offspring of Helios the sun god and Perse, a naiad, originally a less significant character from Greek mythology, is retold in a striking fashion. Though Circe is born of the divine line, she seems to possess no recognizable power and therefore becomes an outcast among the Olympians and Titans. So, she turns to mortal company. In desperation to save a mortal, she discovers

Pharmaka, a form of magic, whose usage is forbidden among the Gods. Due to the possession of such a sorcery, she is exiled to Aiaia, where she further nourishes it. The story then revolves around how she deals with her own growth, the prideful and manipulative gods and her lovers.

The Hero archetype is where an individual embarks on a journey of self-discovery, shows endurance, and reshapes oneself into a form that differs from the initial standpoint. Achilles in *The Song of Achilles* shows archetypal traits of the hero like bravery, courage and commitment to a mission in the Battle of Troy by displaying his valour and proving to be the greatest warrior among the Greeks. “I am Achilles, son of Peleus, god-born, best of the Greeks [...] I have come to bring you victory” (Miller, *Song* 183).

Circe, in the novel, after being exiled, is alone and becomes an outlaw. During this exile, she goes in the pursuit of knowledge and gains mastery over witchcraft, undergoing a transformation, showcasing a trait of the hero. Patroclus, who seems meek and timid during the initial phase of the novel, can be seen exhibiting heroic traits as the story progresses. His courage and will are revealed when the life of his companion is put on the line. Patroclus goes to the extent of sneaking behind Achilles' back and disguises himself to fight in the battle under the pretence of being Achilles.

The Jungian archetype, The Shadow, focuses on a person's hidden psyche that is usually dark but sometimes can also be positive. The Shadow shows traits of anger, envy and revenge. Circe exhibits these traits in two instances. Firstly, Circe exhibits jealousy when Glaucus does not reciprocate her feelings and falls in love with Scylla, a nymph. In anger, she turns Scylla into a monster with six heads and a serpent's body. Secondly, when the men of Odysseus take advantage of her hospitality by trying to assault her, she transforms them into swine as retribution. Similarly, in *The Song of Achilles*, Hector ends the life of Patroclus, who is in the guise of Achilles. Upon receiving the news of Patroclus' death, Achilles, in a miserable agony, goes into a vengeful trance of rage to hunt down Hector and annihilate him. “There are no bargains between lions and men. I will kill you and eat you raw” (Miller, *Song* 328).

“As an empirical concept, the self designates the whole range of psychic phenomena in man. It expresses the unity of the personality as a whole” (Read et al., vol. 6,). The Self archetype focuses on the wholeness of the character and the process of individuation, where the conscious and the unconscious psyche blend. In *Circe*, we can see that since the beginning of the story, Circe seems to be adrift and lost about her identity. No aspect was ever fulfilling. Neither the Gods nor the mortals were kind to her. She had become one of the brutal divinities that she never wanted to become. Towards the end, Telemachus, the son of Odysseus, who becomes her final lover, shows her true understanding, acceptance, and compassion, which makes her feel seen and finally free. She feels at peace knowing that she has found someone who sees her in her true self and that she has completed her duties as a mother to Telegonus. As a result of individuation, she turns herself mortal, feeling complete. “All my life I have been moving forward, and now I am here. I have a mortal's voice, let me have the rest. I lift the brimming bowl to my lips and drink. (Miller, *Circe* 333)

In *The Song of Achilles*, both Achilles and Patroclus undergo the process of individuation. In the initial parts of the novel, Patroclus is naive, deeply insecure, and feels he is not good enough. But towards the end, he transforms into a courageous warrior. Achilles also aids in his attainment of individuation by recognizing him as a worthy companion rather than an overshadowed outlaw.

“Every man carries within him the eternal image of woman, not the image of this or that particular woman, but a definite feminine image...The same is true of the woman: she too has her inborn image of man” (Read et al., vol. 17,). Anima is the feminine aspect hidden in the unconscious psyche of a man. Similarly, Animus is the hidden masculine aspect in a female's unconscious psyche.

Circe shows Animus traits in the novel, *Circe* through learning witchcraft, attaining mastery and the exploration of knowledge. In *The Song of Achilles*, Patroclus exhibits Anima characteristics such as nurturing and emotional connection. He cares for the wounded warriors in the Trojan War by treating them, showing his care and nurturing mindset. And throughout the novel, Patroclus can be seen showing deep affection and care towards Achilles. "He is half of my soul, as the poets say," (Miller, *Song* 284).

The Caregiver archetype is a nurturing figure who supports, protects, and provides comfort. The Caregiver can also be regarded as a mentor or guide. Circe exhibits the traits of the caregiver archetype in many instances. Firstly, she protects and nurtures her son Telegonus all on her own by casting spells and imparts knowledge in him. Secondly, she takes care of her sister, Pasiphae during her childbirth, even getting wounded in the process of delivering the minotaur. This aligns with the caregiver trait. Lastly, she also guides all the lost sailors who come to her island, Aiaia. "Athena would kill my child, and so I defend him." I cried. "Be witness now to the power of Circe, the witch of Aiaia" (Miller, *Circe* 223).

In *The Song of Achilles*, Thetis, the mother of Achilles can be seen showing extensive care towards her son. Over protectiveness is also a trait of the caregiver archetype. Though the care seems to be highly controlling and restrictive, she wants what is best for her son. One of the major examples of this is where she sends Achilles to Chiron's cave in Thessaly to make him stay away from Patroclus. Later, she also sends him to King Lycomedes' island to hide him from Agamemnon, who wants Achilles to fight in the Battle of Troy, after she comes to know from a prophecy that Achilles will die in the said war. The most popular instance where Thetis' caregiver nature is shown is where she dips Achilles in the river Styx to make him invulnerable.

In conclusion, this research reveals the presence of archetypes like The Hero, The Shadow, The Self, The Anima/Animus and The Caregiver in *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe* by Madeline Miller through characters like Patroclus, Achilles and Circe, chiefly. The presence of these archetypal traits helps the reader to understand the journey, transformation and life of the characters. By psychoanalyzing this through the lens of archetypes, we get to see that they all differ and have different paths. Yet, if narrowed down, under the structure of the specific archetype, they are the same. The reader gets a deeper insight into the character, understanding the internal conflicts and the impediments they face from the character's perspective. It leads us to the epiphany that the human experiences from the archaic to the modern stay the same, connecting us through a timeless passage. Be it myth, literature of any sort, or life experiences, all of it comes together under these recurring patterns. This makes us realise that all experiences were universally encountered before, inculcating a sense of familiarity. Therefore, this helps in relating it to our own life, understanding ourselves, our behaviours and hence contributing to our personal growth.

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