Mythological/Archetypal Approach
Applied to Romeo and Juliet

Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

Mythological, archetypal, and psychological criticism are all very closely interrelated. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud’s theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who read texts with the mythological/archetypal approach are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is “a figure...that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested” (“The Problem of Types in Poetry” 1923). He believed that human beings were born innately knowing certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology (long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe). Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.) Every culture has a creation story, a life after death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When reading a work looking for archetypes or myths, critics look for very general recurring themes, characters, and situations. In modern times, the same types of archetypes are used in film, which is why it has been so easy for filmmakers to take a work like Jane Austen’s Emma and adapt it into the typical Hollywood film Clueless. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to know the characters in a work with little or no explanation. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!
Three main points of study:

- archetypal characters
- archetypal images
- archetypal situations

1. Archetypal characters—

- the HERO: a figure, larger than life, whose search for self-identity and/or self-fulfillment results in his own destruction (often accompanied by the destruction of the general society around him). In the aftermath of the death of the hero, however, is progress toward some ideal. While this applies to modern superheroes such as Superman (Clark Kent searching for the balance between his super self and his mortal self), it also applies to the Christian faith's Jesus Christ (a mortal man who comes to terms with his destiny as the Messiah) and thousands of other literary and religious figures throughout history.

- the SCAPEGOAT: an innocent character on whom a situation is blamed—or who assumes the blame for a situation—and is punished in place of the truly guilty party, thus removing the guilt from the culprit and society.

- the LONER or OUTCAST: a character who is separated from (or separates him or herself from) society due to a physical impairment or an emotional or psychological realization that makes this character different. Jesus goes into the desert to discern his destiny; Buddha leaves society to come to terms with his philosophy. Victor Frankenstein travels to remote locales to avoid people when he realizes that he has created a monster. Often the Hero is an outcast at some point in his or her story.

- the TEMPTRESS: the female who possesses what the male desires and uses this desire as a means to his ultimate destruction. Examples are Eve, Juliet, Lady Macbeth.

- the EARTH MOTHER / GODDESS: Mother Nature, Mother Earth, the nurturing, life-giving aspect of femininity.

- the SPIRIT or INTELLECT: the often-unidentified feminine inspiration for works of art and literature. Examples would be Dante's Beatrice, Shakespeare's Dark Lady, etc.

2. Archetypal images—

- COLORS: red as blood, anger, passion, violence; gold as greatness, value, wealth; green as fertility, luxury, growth; blue (the color of the sky) as God-like holiness, peace, serenity; white as purity; etc.
• NUMBERS: three for the Christian trinity; four for the four seasons, the four ancient elements (earth, water, fire, air); twelve for the months of the solar year, etc.

• WATER: the source of life and sustenance; cleansing or purification; baptism.

• GARDENS: natural abundance; easy, beautiful life; new birth, hope; Eden, the original Paradise from which humankind was expelled.

• GEOMETRIC SHAPES: a triangle for the trinity; a circle for perfection and eternity, wholeness, union.

• CELESTIAL BODIES: the sun (masculine) is both the giver and destroyer of life; the moon (feminine) marks the passage of time and controls the course of human events. Seedtime, harvest, etc., are all determined more by the phases of the moon than the phases of the sun.

• YIN AND YANG: any scheme that suggests that each of a pair of opposites partakes of the other's nature, complements the other, and essentially completes the other; without it, the world would erupt into chaos.

3. Archetypal situations—

• the QUEST: the hero's endeavor to establish his or her identity or fulfill his or her destiny.

• the RENEWAL OF LIFE: death and rebirth, resurrection as seen in the cycle of the seasons, the phases of the day, sleeping and waking. Examples are “Sleeping Beauty,” “The Secret Garden,” etc.

• INITIATION: coming of age, rites of passage. Some examples would be the first hunt, weddings, teenage angst films.

• THE FALL: any event that marks a loss of innocence, a devolution from a paradisiacal life and viewpoint to a tainted one.

• REDEMPTIVE SACRIFICE: any voluntary loss, especially a loss of life, that results in another's gaining or regaining a desired state.