

# The Gods Abandon Olympus ... For Hollywood: Why Myths and Legends Remain Useful to Writers

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'The human mind is not a tabula rasa - we are born with inbuilt correspondences to our environment' Harold Schechter, *The New Gods*

## THE CURIOUS PHENOMENON OF GODS

Humanity's fascination with gods and goddesses is one of the great puzzles of our history. Our various attempts—whether sociological, psychological, philosophical, biological etc.—to explain our world-wide propensity to invent, interact with (psychologically), become dependent on, etc. deities have, to my mind, never quite accounted for the phenomenon. As the age of mechanistic science draws to a close new models for understanding our passion for gods and goddesses are emerging—I'm particularly interested in models arising out of the so-called 'New Sciences'.

From the perspective of story-tellers, these strange supernatural beings were present from the very beginning of oral forms of literature. They survived, for a time, the advent of writing, but it is true to say that books were one of the cultural inventions that helped tear we humans away from the ancient polytheistic gods. I

want to begin this article by reminding readers that whole civilisations were built upon human affection for members of 'families of gods' - the modern dismissal of this strange psychological and spiritual proclivity in members of historic societies seems to me to be profoundly ethnocentric and patronising.

## **DOMESTIC GODS V GODS OF EMPIRE: DOMESTIC GODS ASSIST PEOPLE TO OVERCOME LIFESPAN CHALLENGES**

If we leave aside, for a moment, the 'gods of empire', i.e. state sanctioned deities, and also the various monotheistic conceptions of an 'uber god' (i.e. 'a god of greater reach'), we note that in many traditions ordinary people interacted on a daily basis with a range of local, familial and household spirits; nature spirits; and also relatively localized tribal deities. These 'domestic gods' bring us closest, I think, to an understanding of the links between deities, stages of the human lifespan and the story archetypes and motifs that have played such an important role in story construction down the ages (especially international folk-motifs used by various cultures).

The 'domestic gods', and even the earliest polytheistic 'gods of State/Empire', tended to preside over various stages of the human lifespan. Honour them, follow their guidance, etc. and you might secure your heart's desire at *a particular stage of the lifespan*, whether it be finding a lover, birthing a healthy child, gaining success in a chosen vocation, securing freedom from illness, etc. Gods represented pathways to a happy life—to 'possible futures' free from various kinds of lack, pain, suffering.

## **GODS ALSO REPRESENT PATHWAYS TO 'BEST POSSIBLE FUTURES'**

Though there have been many psychological and sociological explanations for the widespread existence of deities in historic human societies—for our purposes, I'm more interested in what people asked of these supernatural personages. To honour a god, I suggested above, was to try to secure a desired future; i.e. a future that avoided suffering, and secured the best possible future for the devotee. Put slightly differently, deities helped humans to overcome, overpower, neutralise, avoid, etc. undesirable futures, challenges, conflicts, life and well-being threats, etc. Gods were a means to minimise personal suffering by way of focused

mindfulness techniques that were embodied in mythic ceremonies, rituals, prayers, sacred dances and performances, sacred art, etc.

## **GODS (ARCHETYPES) OVERSEE DEVELOPMENTAL TRANSFORMATIONS**

Archetypes, in neo-Jungian thinking, are related to: a) developmental stages/challenges; b) psychospiritual needs fields, and c) relational exchanges during various stages of life. The process of 'individuation, as written about by Jung, for example, transforms a conflict-ridden psyche into the 'Self Archetype'. Specific archetypes (deities?) preside over this important transformation. To emphasise the point, the successful manifestation in the world of the 'Self Archetype' represents the coming into being of highly positive 'best possible futures'.

Jung theorised that the archetypes are mostly locked within the psyche (i.e. in the 'collective unconscious'). Some contemporary Jungians suggest that the archetypes are the means by which the emotional and relational dimensions to the psyche work to explore or scan the environment in order to fulfill key human needs arising at particular stages of the lifespan. Erich Neumann, developing Jung's insights, argued that the archetypes tend to constellate in the human psyche—and even in particular societies—with either positive or negative polarities. Jung had also suggested that the archetypes may possess external 'psychoid' elements—i.e. apart from historic psychological dimensions, archetypes also possess outward looking 'transpersonal', maybe even 'paranormal', dimensions that respond to current challenges, and operate, at times, outside mechanistic scientific understandings of reality.

Archetypes, to Jung act a bit like 'polytheistic' gods, but they are locked, mostly, in the deep psyche of individuals.

## **STORY ARCS ALSO ADDRESS LIFESPAN CONFLICTS/CHALLENGES**

The power of deities to help people avoid undesirable futures (by overcoming significant life-span 'challenges/threats') links these strange entities to a number of ancient, as well as some more modern, story arcs, since we note that almost all protagonists in popular—and even in many literary—stories, are confronted with challenges that also threaten them with 'undesirable' or 'dystopian/nightmarish'

futures—futures in which ‘antagonistic forces’, wielded by a story’s chief antagonist, prevail. Most great stories instinctively contrast possible ‘undesirable futures’ for the protagonist, with longed for ‘desirable ones’. Protagonists search for desirable futures free of suffering—and tragedies are recognised as such, precisely because the protagonist fails in some key way and the antagonistic forces of the story prevail, i.e. succeed in creating and ‘undesirable future’ (for the protagonist).

## **ANCIENT HEROES BECAME PROTAGONISTS AND VIEWPOINT CHARACTERS**

The 'hero archetype' or religious cult figure, has long been linked to the 'protagonist' figure so fundamental to story-telling—otherwise known as the 'viewpoint character' (or characters in the case of Romance stories). It is important to remember two things about heroes and protagonists: 1) they typically confront life challenges of varying severity, and the various story arcs that humans have developed over the millennia (and now routinely popularised in Hollywood movies and most novels published each year) usually centre upon introducing, complicating, confronting, defeating (or being defeated by) etc. antagonists that try to enact dystopian outcomes associated with those life challenges. The various ‘hero's journey’ story arcs popularized over the past 40 years usually acknowledge, or disingenuously conceal, ancient precursor arcs containing similar ‘story beats’ and story beats successions.

## **THE ORIGINS OF ANCIENT STORY ARCS CAN OFTEN BE TRACED to HISTORIC POLYTHEISTIC TRADITIONS**

Historically the hero/protagonist archetype, and the various story arcs associated with this figure, feature conflicts: between mortals; between mortals and monsters; between mortals and deities; between deities and deities; and, also, between mortals and the natural world. In the case of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, foundation 'hero' (and polytheistic) texts of the Western tradition, we note that the challenges confronted by heroes like Odysseus, Hector, Achilles, etc. amount to conflicts within the greater family of the Greek Gods (the Olympians). Perseus and Jason, interesting variants on the 'beefcake' hero archetype typified by Heracles/Hercules (and re-imagined these days, *ad nauseam*, in action hero types and sports stars), were nevertheless dependent upon the whims of ancient Greek polytheistic deities. Earlier Mesopotamian hero figures, like Gilgamesh, were also

at the mercy of the Gods; likewise, a host of Celtic and Norse hero/protagonists.

In Jungian terminology, hero/protagonist archetypes—whether mortal or semi-mortal—are typically embedded in story arcs featuring transformative interactions with other archetypal entities, e.g. allies, threshold guardians, heralds, shape-shifters, antagonists/shadow archetypes, mentors, etc. If we have learnt anything from Jung, Joseph Campbell and Christopher Vogler, it is that common story archetypes are little more than positively, or negatively, polarised polytheistic 'deities' in disguise. Usually, a successful story begins with key archetypes surrounding the protagonist in 'negative polarity'. As the 'Self Archetype' of the protagonist emerges negatively polarized archetypal energies are slowly transformed into positive polarities by story's end.

This phenomenon also applies to ancient mythic and legendary story arc variations linked to Maureen Murdock's 'Heroine's Journey' story arc as well as Kim Hudson's 'Virgin's Promise' story arc. Two highly successful movies, that I know of, seem to closely match Hudson's rework of the Vogler/Campbell arc i.e. *Billy Eliot* and *Bend it Like Beckham*.

## **VEILED GODS IN APPARENTLY SECULAR EXTENDED NARRATIVES**

Veiled disputes among the Gods and humans also remain fundamental to many, if not the majority, of successful modern, apparently 'Realist'—i.e. secular/non-spiritual—novels, plays, films, etc. I find this fact quite amusing since many rusted on atheists, not to mention many devoted 'monotheists', are addicted to entertainment in which ancient polytheistic 'protagonist arcs'—and accompanying 'deities' (or 'story archetypes')—figure prominently and are only barely disguised.

## **Some Obvious Places to Spot Gods and Goddesses (Veiled and Unveiled)**

### **UNVEILED GODS IN FANTASTIC FICTION**

As we might expect, 'fantastic literature' is probably the easiest place to stumble across the vanquished deities of ancient polytheistic cultures. In many fantasy novels, for example, they often appear in semi-pure form. Paradoxically, however, the tradition of fantasy birthed by Tolkien, saw the deities retreat to the story

structure (i.e. story arc) level. This is because *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy opted for both a dualistic cosmology influenced by Mythraism (I thank Jan Bayliss for this insight) and a reworked Anglo-Saxon 'Dark Age' cosmology such as we find in *Beowulf*, i.e. basically a replay of the 'twilight of the gods' scenario that unfolded in English history after the Fall of Rome, but before the full triumph of Medieval Christianity. The age of the polytheistic deities had passed but the Christian epiphany had not yet completely come to dominate among many northern European peoples.

## **ARTHURIAN LITERATURE AND PARTIALLY CONCEALED CELTIC DEITIES**

We find the old Celtic deities—only slightly corrupted—in a great deal of modern Arthurian literature. A range of Celtic deities lurk behind key Arthurian figures. Viviane, Niniane, Nimue and the Lady of the Lake, for example, are proven linguistic corruptions of the same pre-Christian Welsh deity, i.e. Rhiannon, goddess of horses, sovereignty and love, among other things. She, in turn, is linked to a pan-Celtic horse deity, Epona; as well as, in Ireland, the figure of Macha (yet another horse goddess). Morgana, by contrast, has links to any number of Welsh and Irish goddesses—including female deities of battle, magic, transformation, death and, once again, sovereignty. The *cailleach*/crones of British and Irish pagan traditions link Morgana to the Irish goddess named the Morighann, as well as to the Welsh goddess Arianrhod, and quite possibly the inspirational witch-figure Ceridwen (we note that both Arianrhod and Cerdiwen figure in the the *Mabinogion*).

Even Arthur was perhaps originally an obscure Celtic deity named *Artaios* (i.e. 'bear god', and linked to both the *Ursa Major* or 'Great Bear' constellation and a Gaulish version of Mercury-Hermes). By the time of the Arthurian romances, Arthur presents as a mortal hero-king surrounded by other disguised deities embedded in his court, or evident among his enemies. Likewise, Guinevere is, in essence, a Celtic Sovereignty Goddess given to selecting a mortal champion to marry, before dropping him later as his strength and courage wane, or his morals become corrupt (thus endangering the land she is tasked with protecting).

There are any number of theories concerning the pre-Christian origins of Merlin, but most link him to legendary figures like Taliesin, Gwydion, Myrddn, Suibne, etc. — i.e. figures much closer to uncorrupted Celtic pagan figures. We could continue

on here, but it should already be evident that watching something as innocuous as the *Merlin* TV series of the early 2000s, or the *Camelot* series, that came a little later, permit even the most rabid secularists to mainline the wisdom, magic and lifespan lessons of any number of pagan Celtic deities.

## DEITIES AND FAIRYTALE CHARACTERS IN CONTEMPORARY STORY-TELLING

All the fantastic and speculative fiction genres, i.e. 'modern romance' and 'epic romance' genres—e.g. Fantasy, Horror, Magical Realism, and surprisingly, even Science Fiction and Quantum Fiction—feature disguised, or completely undisguised, deities at both the 'story arc' and 'story beat' levels. The 2004 SF TV series, and remake, of *Battlestar Galactica* featured undisguised, predominantly ancient Greek, deities in the religious foundations of the 12 colonies. We also find undisguised polytheistic deities in 1990s TV shows like *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Hercules*. The TV series *Lost*; the smash-hit series *Game of Thrones*; and the more recent series, *Vikings*, as well as *American Gods*, all feature undisguised polytheistic deities. In *The Hunger Games* the main character, Katniss, is an obvious Artemis figure due to her love of archery and her capacity to merge with the natural world. The BBC's *Going Postal* (2010) featured a barely veiled 'Mercury/Hermes' as the main protagonist—the mini-series was based upon the novel of the same name by Terry Pratchett.

As an aside, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, after being reworked as a movie in 2010, highlighted longstanding parallels between Hermes-Mercury and the play's character 'Ariel'. In the 2010 movie the story reimagined a long theorised Mythic source for the story—i.e. the Celtic myth-legend concerning how Gwion Bach became Taliesin, the master bard. Prospero becomes Prospera in the movie (i.e. Ceridwen in the old Welsh story) and Caliban has his origins in Afagddu (i.e. Ceridwen's monstrous son). Similarly, Miranda has parallels with Crearwy (i.e. Ceridwen's beautiful daughter).

Re-imaginings of fairy-tales are also extraordinarily numerous in modern story-telling—e.g. *Red Riding Hood*, *Bluebeard*, *Jack the Giant Killer* and the various seasons of *Once Upon a Time* represent interesting recent re-imaginings of old stories, characters and motifs. The movies exploring the life of Shrek also employed a veritable host of fairy tale characters, whilst re-imagining them for modern audiences (after reworking Shrek as a hero instead of an ogre). Recall,

also, that the Cinderella story has become a story arc in its own right—sometimes termed the ‘Rags to Riches Arc’. Many movies follow its story beat progression closely, e.g. *Pretty Woman*, *Slumdog Millionaire* and even *Rocky*. We also note endless obvious or semi-disguised re-workings of old myths and legends. *Moulin Rouge*, for example, ‘re-imagines’ the Orpheus myth.

## **Polytheistic Gods and Archetypes in Less Obvious Places**

### **WHAT ABOUT STORY ARCHETYPES ATTACHED TO APPARENTLY “REALIST” STORIES?**

It is less well known, however, that a range of modern realist genres, e.g. Romance, Detective Fiction, Thrillers and much Historical Fiction, contain concealed gods and goddesses through the technique of transposing essential divine character traits onto new, essentially mortal, characters. Many recurring character types and character tropes found in modern genre fiction have ancestors among the deities of old—though usually they have been ‘desacralised’, or ‘disenchanted’, (i.e. they’ve lost the supernatural dimension to defining character traits).

The archetypes Vogler sees as fundamental to the Hero's Journey all have divine parallels—and the Vogler/Campbell Arc has been enormously popular in international story-telling for a number of decades. *The Star Wars* franchise, for example, used Joseph Campbell's version of the heroic arc to consciously plan story beat progressions. Although nominally expressing realist/secular modes of being, many modern stories actually represent ‘re-imaginings’ of veiled age-old gods, magical entities and mythic story tropes.

We even find documentaries and reality TV shows busily forcing ‘real-life’ experiences and event sequences into ancient story arc straitjackets. Reality TV should be re-labelled ‘Recycled Mythopoetic TV’ as a consequence! Real world people exhibiting certain traits in Reality TV shows and documentaries are sometimes assigned ancient archetypal roles—yes, the ethics here is very problematic especially when someone is given an ‘antagonistic’ or ‘shadow’ role.

### **STORY OFTEN SHIFTS ARCHETYPES THAT ARE NEGATIVELY POLARISED TO A POSITIVE POLARITY**

Good story-telling, in many genres, shifts characters (usually protagonists, allies, mentors, shapeshifters but occasionally, antagonists and threshold guardians) from a negative polarity to a positive polarity as the story arc unfolds. Let's start with some of the archetypes Vogler singles out as crucial to many stories.

**HERALDS:** Hermes/Mercury/Thoth. The necessity of change in the world—in a life and, for protagonists, in story—is presided over by herald figures. Though most apparent during the 'cage' or 'incomplete ordinary world' stages of stories. They often appear during the 'inciting incident' at the start of a story. They can be positive, negative or neutral and are in fact constant motivators to continue transformation processes throughout a story.

Hermes, a herald—among many other assigned roles—was at the heart of the alchemical journey for good reason. Mercury was a metal believed to facilitate the entire alchemical work. The same god thus features in many stories featuring challenges that need to be faced. The Herald makes conscious to a protagonist the gap between a 'desired present' and the 'miserable reality' of the actual present. This realization leads to the transformation of the protagonist through effort.

In alchemy 'lead' equals 'the cage' story beat, i.e. the untransformed, stagnant, defeated reality if transformation does not occur. 'Gold', on the other hand, equals the rewards (i.e. the better selves in better futures) that accompany successful transformation. Meeting and defeating the antagonist/shadow (almost always symbolic of a 'little bit' or 'a big slab' of death). I also see Hermes in the constant fight a protagonist experiences between giving up, settling for a comfortable half-life or 'refusing the call' to expend effort to attain a 'desired future' and the counter urge (associated with the life force) to rise to the challenge and plough on with courage to overcome any challenges. Hermes as herald exists in the tension-relaxation-tension-relaxation, etc. rhythms of a story, also in the escalating suspense that gathers across a story as more and more of the hero's resources are brought into play to overcome challenges and manifest desired 'better futures'.

The Herald was thus the embodiment of a way of perceiving, even in the midst of oppression/hopelessness/unawareness/'the cage', that points the way to absolute aliveness/well-being.

## **TRICKSTER GODS**

The desacralisation of humour in the Western tradition has a long history due to humour being assigned a negligible role within Christianity and the other major Monotheistic traditions—i.e. at best, irrelevant (like sex and complex/multifaceted female notions of divinity), at worst, untrustworthy and of the devil. Nevertheless, other sacred traditions treat humour as a divine/spiritual phenomena - a gift of the trickster god/s—e.g. Loki, Hanuman, Anansi, Mercury/Hermes, Kokopelli, Coyote, Raven, etc. Apart from providing comic relief (to offset moments of high drama suspense), Jung saw Trickster 'archetypes' in stories as gateways to the personal unconscious, as well as the collective unconscious – i.e. carriers of life energies like sexuality, lightness of being, democratic levelling, embodiment (as in our love of toilet humour), i.e. energies easily lost to a 'consciousness' that has become excessively serious/rational/ intellectual / puritan / repressed i.e. unbalanced.

Tricksters often feature among the protagonist's allies—though in some polytheist traditions e.g. the Norse tradition, they are, like Loki, sometimes cruel figures in alliance with the shadow/antagonist archetype in a story. The Joker and the Riddler in Batman illustrate the antagonist possibilities of the Trickster archetype. Of course, in Ancient Greece, Comedies along with Tragedies were much loved and presided over by Dionysus, though the true comedic God in ancient Greece was probably Hermes, and the Hymn to Hermes shows us why this is so. 'Comedy', as a literary genre category, represents a particular kind of drama in which conflict is generated through misunderstandings among a close-knit group. Everything usually turns out well in the end, and antagonists are usually ridiculed, outsmarted etc. or simply experience a change of heart. The modern 'Virgin's Promise' story arc, outlined by Kim Hudson, is perfectly suited to this old form of comedy e.g. watch *Bend it Like Beckham*.

## **Femme Fatales, Homme Fatales and Shapeshifters (Jung: Anima/Animus).**

These archetypes once took the form of deities that could flit in and out of mortal bodies, or even, in some cases, animal bodies, at will. Such male, female or androgynous deities as Hecate, Aphrodite, Ceridwen (British shapeshifter goddess), Dionysus, etc. often signified dangerous, almost irresistible, erotic/love

and/or magical energies to protagonists, even as they tested the protagonist and initiated psycho-spiritual growth.

In Celtic traditions the Goddess of Sovereignty, for example, tested the worth of heroes and talented bards, ovates or druids. A kind of sacred marriage (or 'synergy') sometimes eventuated if a hero passed the tests of the shapeshifter, other times, as in the Cerridwen-Taliesin story, a mentorship relationship was established after such tests. During the testing process, however, the hero often felt attacked, betrayed, unjustly treated, bamboozled, confused, etc, and in extreme cases (e.g. the Conan books) seductive female monsters abound. Human courtship, of course, veils fairly ruthless (Darwinian) selection processes—and we note that femme or homme fatales often force protagonists to 'grow up', to respect to the complexities of the other gender/s, and to work through the lingering childhood complexes. For example, Bridget Jones falls for her boss (a shapeshifting *homme fatale* cad played by Hugh Grant). He is charming, sexually exciting but compulsively disloyal—in short a shapeshifter catalyst character that forces Bridget to grow. Jung saw *femme fatales* as an aspect of the *anima* figure for heterosexual men, whereas a male 'cad', as per Hugh, represents the *animus* archetype for heterosexual women.

In storytelling, the Shapeshifter's polarity swings back and forth between positive and negative poles across the story arc and, to move to psychology for a moment, we recall that along with the integration of the Shadow archetype, the integration of the contra-sexual 'shapeshifting' erotic archetype was fundamental to what Jung called 'the individuation process'. Such figures often feature in modern storytelling—often with built in story structure 'reversals' in play (e.g. in Romantic comedies lovers often vehemently dislike each other to begin with).

### **Mentors:**

Older male, female or LGBTIQ deities and legendary figures are often assigned the role of mentor: e.g. Zeus and Poseidon (ancient Greece); Odin or Woden (in ancient Norse and Germanic traditions). Jehovah in Judaism, are examples of this divine archetype. In legendary literatures we have Merlin, Hermes Trismegistus, and a bevy of druids and wise 'elders'. Saints and philosophers were also given such roles (Plato, Aristotle, Virgil for Dante, and gurus in general, in Hindu traditions). Various older female deities also took on the Mentor role in Pagan

Celtic tradition—i.e. the *calleachs*, or wise old crones of various ancient Celtic traditions.

Mentors provide protagonists with 'gifts' and 'crucial knowledge' that aid the transformative processes the protagonist is undergoing. Mentors still figure constantly in modern storytelling—Dumbledore and Gandalf being two modern examples. The ancient symbolism concerns wise, older-seeming deities who gift important objects to select heroes/heroines, that they can succeed in their quest for wholeness, 'better futures' or 'the Self Archetype'. The 'gift exchange' usually occurs around the time the protagonist leaves behind the ordinary world, of 'the Cage', for the extraordinary world, i.e. we are talking about the point at which the hero 'crosses the threshold' between worlds (from Vogler).

### **Antagonists/Shadow:**

Usually, these figures represent 'anti-life' deities/archetypes, i.e. death and underworld deities/archetypes, since most story arcs feature a hero/protagonist struggling to overcome some manifestation of 'death in life' during the climax of the story. Interestingly, a very ancient story, *Innana's Descent into the Underworld* saw Innana, the main deity/protagonist descend in order to confront her evil sister 'Erishkagil'. It is surely one of the most ancient heroic descent stories we possess—though it was repressed for thousands of years.

Hades, Persephone, the Devil, and numerous other Kings and Queens of the underworld are the true models for most antagonist/ shadow archetypes found in modern story-telling. Antagonists always represent the threat of the death of something to the protagonist, and thus every story in which protagonists battle the threat of annihilation at story climax re-enacts the ancient battle of mortals and heroes with the death gods—a drama re-enacted in story and ritual over many millennia by numerous cultures. The central drama of Christianity re-enacted this ancient descent drama via the resurrection story—though the Death Gods themselves, are rendered invisible in that story.

### **GREAT MOTHER, FATHER GOD, DIVINE CHILD AND SELF ARCHETYPES AND GODS:**

I suspect that other archetypes not covered by Vogler are nevertheless fundamental to much modern story-telling. Among the most important are the Great Mother/Queen/Empress archetype, The King/Emperor/Father archetype,

the inner child archetype, various 'love/lover' archetypes and the 'Self' archetype, which Jung associated with the transcendent function—a function that often appears in modern stories in the 3rd quarter of longer narratives, i.e. just prior to the 'Ordeal' story beat (as per Vogler's schemata).

## **POLYTHEISTIC RESIDUES IN SPIRITUAL ALCHEMY: STORY ARCS & ARCHETYPES of a SACRED PSYCHOANALYSIS?**

What some have called the 'spiritual alchemy' tradition and its symbolism (spanning Egyptian traditions from at least the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE right through to the proto-scientific alchemy of the Early Modern era) preserved many ancient polytheistic deities, and their unveiled and veiled story-arcs—even during the long centuries of Christian monotheism. The figures of Luna, Sol and the 'child of the philosophers'—who was sometimes identified as Christ, sometimes as Hermes (or Mercury)—were central to Alchemical symbolism and the alchemical 'great work' expresses.

Indeed, the alchemical process, according to Jung, resembles a 'self-transformation narrative' i.e. from a state of confusion and the partial absence of the 'Self Archetype', to a higher psycho-spiritual state in which the Self Archetype, the 'Child of the Philosophers', becomes manifest. To Jung, the alchemical process became synonymous with what he described as 'the Individuation process', i.e. a process at the very heart of Jungian psychology. Any transformative process of this sort suggests a 'story arc', and the various stages of alchemical purification might be said to resemble the numerous 'story beats' we associate with both ancient and contemporary story arcs.

Likewise, Luna and Sol might be seen as Hera and Zeus, or Juno and Jupiter, indeed any number of Indo European 'divine couples' turned 'parental'. The alchemical story arc often involved sexual symbolism involving Sol and Luna falling in love, bickering, conceiving a child, birthing and then raising the child etc - key stages of innumerable manifestations of the so-called *hierosgamos* drama (divine coupling) in world mythology, but the same sequences are at the heart of any good Romance novel. We can thus link ancient psycho-religious dramas endemic to the family unit to 'Vogler's arc' (though Vogler himself is sometimes unaware of them).

The birthing of the 'child of the philosophers' during the *rubido stage* (or red and gold stage) of alchemical purification, is thus symbolic of birthing a perfected spiritual self after a great struggle with 'corrupted' aspects of the psyche. This birth is also a struggle to birth 'best possible futures' for that self. Writers would do well to understand that this 'blueprint' for successful 'self-transformation' (and staring down challenges in life) is a subliminal desire of readers when they read a novel or watch a movie.

The *masa confusa* or '*nigredo stage*', leads to the '*albedo stage*', and the entire process (story arc?), culminates in the '*rubido stage*' (successful transformation) and the battle with corrupted parental/lifespan, divine and cosmological energies presides over both the 'great work' (opus) of alchemists and the, hopefully, great work of writers. To link these thoughts in with Vogler's framework again for a moment: 1. *masa confusa* = opening of the story (incompleteness, the cage); 2. *nigredo* = Crossing the Threshold, and opening up to possibility and a limited version of the true Self; 3. *albedo* = inner flowering of the Self (but this is not yet manifest in the world), i.e. a change of motivation (the beats after story midpoint); 4. *rubido* = manifestation of best possible self in the social world, (last three story beats, particularly 'Resurrection', 'Reward' and 'Return with the Elixir', etc. The shadowy/antagonistic aspects of the personality have, in both the Alchemical Arc and the Vogler Arc, been reintegrated into the Self by story's end, and the various personality 'vices' that can ruin a life have been burnt off.

The movement from incomplete self to best possible self thus equals the working through of the incomplete Self in the direction of the manifestation of the Self Archetype. The Shadow (i.e. Antagonistic) archetypes at in play both in alchemy and story arcs often involve 'negatively polarised parent figures'. In fairy tale lingo: the negatively polarized 'Great Mother' archetype takes the form of evil stepmothers, evil queens and witches, etc., whereas, the negatively polarized father archetype manifests as power drunk/oppressive, kings, evil wizards, etc.

Star Wars understood these ancient psycho-religious conflicts well when it set up the battle between Luke and Darth, son and father, as one of the key dramas of the story. Importantly, the major changes to the protagonist that occur at midpoint appear as a kind of 'divine grace' or 'gift of the gods'. Jung called this gift the 'transcendent function' and said that successful therapy depended upon it. However, he also said that it appeared after great inner turmoil (an 'inner battle')

with various aspects of the self) and arrived as if 'from outside' the client/patient relationship.

## **DIVINE ELEMENTS IN THE STORY BEATS THEMSELVES?**

### **THE ORDEAL IN THE INNERMOST CAVE**

This climactic 'beat', as well as the beat Vogler labels 'The Road Back', are linked by Jungians to a successful struggle with the Shadow Archetype. As a consequence, life or death struggles in underworld environments with monsters that replicate 'birth trauma', childhood abuse, etc. feature often—as do life or death experiences involving strangulation, compression, suffocation, being devoured or ripped apart, etc. Typically, such struggles are followed by rebirth/resurrection beats (as, indeed, we find in Vogler's schemata) as the near-to-death protagonist is revived. We are now 3/4 the way through a novel, play or film.

The negative polarisation of the Mother Archetype is vouched for in many traditions—e.g. the Kali figure in Hinduism. Almost all stories in which characters overcome challenges incorporate 'birth-death-rebirth' symbolism, at minimum, and again there are many ancient precedents. In Sumerian traditions, Innana descended, perished and was revived; in ancient Greek 'mystery cults' associated with Orpheus and Eurydice, as well as Demeter, Persephone and Hades, a similar sequence was ritualistically acted out devotees. Classical heroes like Odysseus and Aeneas were also forced to descend among the dead before being revived in mortal life. Christianity, of course, made this dramatic sequence fundamental to its divine epiphany ... And so do innumerable Hollywood movies, genre novels and, yes, documentaries. For example, Jamie Oliver's plans to reform school food habits routinely 'die' at the 30 minute mark in each show, before being 'resurrected' around 5 minutes from the end of a 40 minute show!

## **ARCHETYPAL / DIVINE CONFLICTS CAN MANIFEST IN A RANGE OF NATURAL AND COSMOLOGICAL PHENOMENA**

Most ancient traditions gave specific deities a range of cosmological and material manifestations—Gods also manifest, it should be said, in animal form, plant/tree form and in specific minerals, planets and human made objects. From the point of

view of story-telling, such manifestations allow for a range of symbolic ways in which deities might initiate challenges and conflicts for humans. In terms of contemporary story arcs—‘negatively polarised’ story archetypes attached to various ‘story beats’ need not manifest in human form all the time, they could just as easily take the form of, say, antagonistic forces in nature e.g. storms with severe lightning, droughts or plagues, Tsunamis, volcanoes, floods, droughts, etc. It is my hunch that modern story-tellers instinctively i.e. unconsciously, make use of these archaic ‘elemental’ associations through the adroit use of symbolism as embedded in ‘setting’ and in significant ‘uncanny objects’ associated with characters and, in particular, with the journey of the protagonist character/s of a story. The principles associated with ‘symbol transformation’ across a narrative, often parallel story arc developments involving the transformation of ‘negatively polarised’ story archetypes into positively charged archetypes.

The movement away from ‘negatively polarised archetypes’ in relational networks toward ‘positively charged archetypes’ in relational networks also occurs with story arc developments—well, for some characters, at least, in a story. Good story-telling reveals, in principle, a pathway for readers/story recipients to positive relational ideals, which in turn underpin human states of being, experiences and epiphanies etc. traditionally associated with transcendence and spiritual progress. We note that most of the world's mythic traditions used story to convey spiritual energies, lessons, truths, etc. to human beings undergoing specific life-span stages and confronting specific life span challenges. This ancient function for story-telling, has never been completely lost.

## CONCLUSION

"When the established forms of religion cease to function in any meaningful way for a culture, the gods are driven underground and take up their residence in despised and subterranean regions: 'low' culture and the 'lowly' unconscious." Harold Schechter, *The New Gods*

Myths and legends sacralise, re-enchanted and reanimate the world. For some reason, these old stories catapult us out of ordinary consciousness and into magical, sacralised reveries. Adding mythic elements to a modern story also adds awe, magic, archetypal motifs and struggles associated with ‘the Big Ideas’ of life. etc. The world appears to us as if in its original glory—lit up, as it were.

Polytheistic mythic elements deal with very human conflicts associated with key life-span changes/transformations, as well as typical challenges and hurdles. The ancient Polytheistic deities represent Developmental Archetypes, psycho-spiritual projections concerned with relationships and the environment that humans routinely use to fulfil deep emotional needs. The deities/archetypes, especially those I have labelled ‘the domestic deities’ or ‘developmental deities’ in this article, are hard-wired into our psyches and change/evolve but slowly from generation to generation. When writers tap into this ‘subterranean theatre of the psyche’ via their stories, they perhaps give readers both the map, and even the strength and courage, to confront the key challenges in their lives as they seek out their own ‘best possible selves’ and ‘best possible futures’.

### **Author Bio (as at November 2022)**

Dr. Ian Irvine (Hobson) is an Australian-based poet, lyricist-musician, fiction writer, non-fiction writer, editor and creative arts and humanities lecturer. His work has featured in publications as diverse as *Humanitas* (USA), *The Antigoneish Review* (Canada), *Tears in the Fence* (UK), *Linq* (Australia) and *Takahe* (NZ), as well as in a number of Australian national poetry anthologies: *Best Australian Poems 2005* (Black Ink Books) and *Agenda: ‘Australian Edition’*. He is the author of four books and co-editor of three journals and currently teaches in the Professional Writing and Editing program at Bendigo Kangan Institute (Bendigo, Australia). Between 2012 and 2018 he taught in the same program at Victoria University, Melbourne. He has also taught Medieval and Early Modern history, as well as Contemporary Social Theory at La Trobe University (Bendigo, Australia) in the 1990s and holds a PhD for his work on creative, normative and dysfunctional forms of alienation and morbid ennui. Between 2018 and 2022, almost 100 of his songs (totalling 9 studio albums) were professionally produced and distributed through international Indie music networks. Many of the songs were played on underground, Indie, Alternative Rock, community and commercial radio stations in numerous countries, and a significant number charted.