

***Initiation:***  
***Two Mythologems***

A summary of Joseph L. Henderson's September 25, 1994 lecture presentation before The San Francisco Friends of ARAS entitled  
“The Mythologem: Initiation in Gilgamesh and at Eleusis.”

In their 1941 collaborative publication, Essays on a Science of Mythology<sup>1</sup>, Carl Jung and the Hungarian classical scholar, Carl Kerényi mapped out the core concepts of archetypal research. These include the spontaneous recurrence of mythological images and themes in the dreams and fantasies of modern persons; the identification of such affectively laden images as archetypes; the multiplicity of forms of each archetype; the bipolar meanings attributable to each archetype; and the importance of the mythologem

---

<sup>1</sup>Jung, C.G. and Carl Kerényi. *Essays of a Science of Mythology*. Princeton University Press (1969)

as the structure residing behind each of the different classes of myths (i.e., the mythologems of the trickster, hero, initiate, child, mother, etc.).

Example of a child archetype:



**Figure 1** *Putto with Dolphin*. Hellenistic Greek bronze statuette found in Pompeii. The National Archaeological Museum, Naples. From Essays on a Science of Mythology, plate 3.

In Dr. Henderson's slide and lecture presentation, he demonstrated the mythologems of "the hero" and "initiation" in the epic of Gilgamesh and the mythologem of "initiation" in the myth of Demeter and Persephone as re-enacted in the Eleusinian Mysteries. In doing so, he addressed "the importance of initiation as it emerges from the myth of the hero."

Dr. Henderson began by reminding us that, "In studying a particular mythologem, we look first for the image or images by which it can be seen - by which it can be partially known." (JLH) For this aspect of the study, the Archive for Research of Archetypal Symbolism (ARAS), with its thousands of images and symbolic descriptions of artwork, from cultures all around the world, is an invaluable resource.

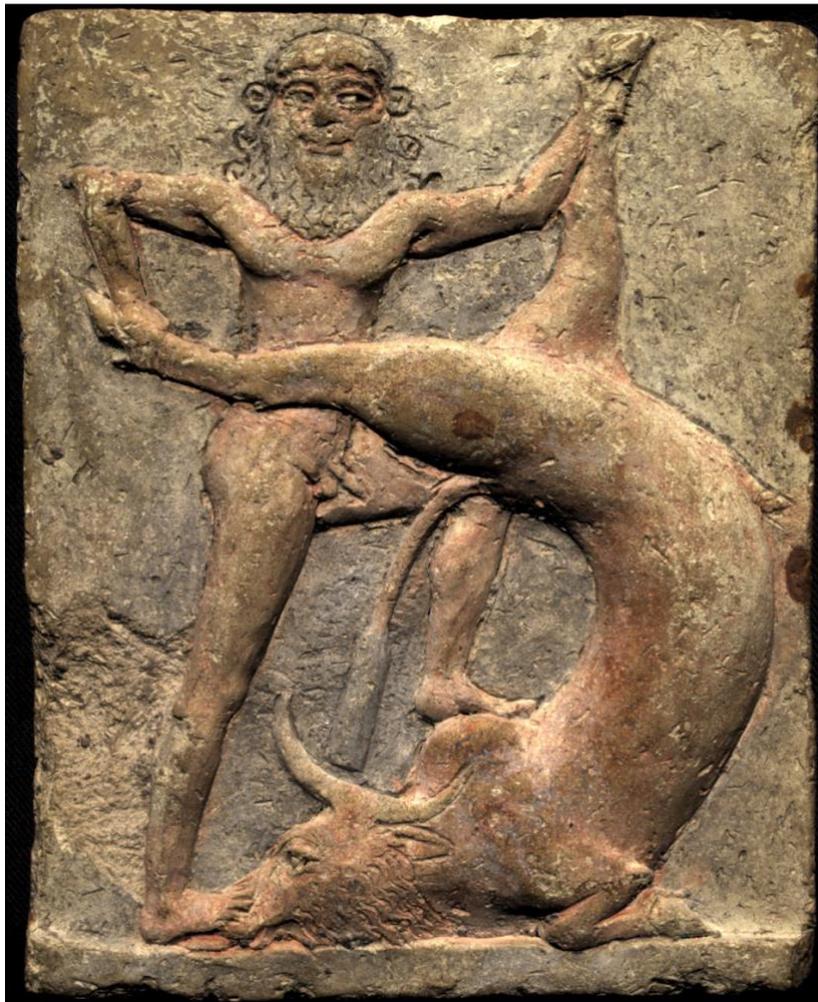
Dr. Henderson drew us into the mythologem of the hero - who overcomes the forces of darkness to win the treasure hard to attain - by recalling the Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh and showing us an ARAS slide of Gilgamesh and Enkidu slaying Humbaba. In this epic, Gilgamesh and his dear friend Enkidu engage in all manner of heroic acts of strength and courage. The friendship they form is said to be a metaphor of ego and shadow coming to terms with each other. Together they slay Humbaba, described by Dr. Henderson as symbolic of the negative power of the Great Mother.



**Figure 2** ARAS 2Bt,607. *Gilgamesh and Enkidu slaying Humbaba*. Stone relief, 10-9<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Syria. Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (Ass. Number 21.8)

After the slaying of Humbaba, Ishtar, the Queen of Heaven, becomes enraged and sends the Bull of Heaven to destroy them. But they kill the Bull of Heaven too and in a moment of extraordinary hubris Enkidu tears off the bull's right thigh and throws it in Ishtar's face. For this transgression Enkidu soon falls ill and dies. Gilgamesh is overcome with grief. He "is left with his power but not love or understanding. So he concedes the need to seek another goal - to find his way to initiation - to go on 'the

journey of the soul.' ... The early hero slays everything and the later hero understands everything.... After their dragon slaying and Enkidu's death the heroic dragon slaying ends" (JLH) and the journey of the soul begins.

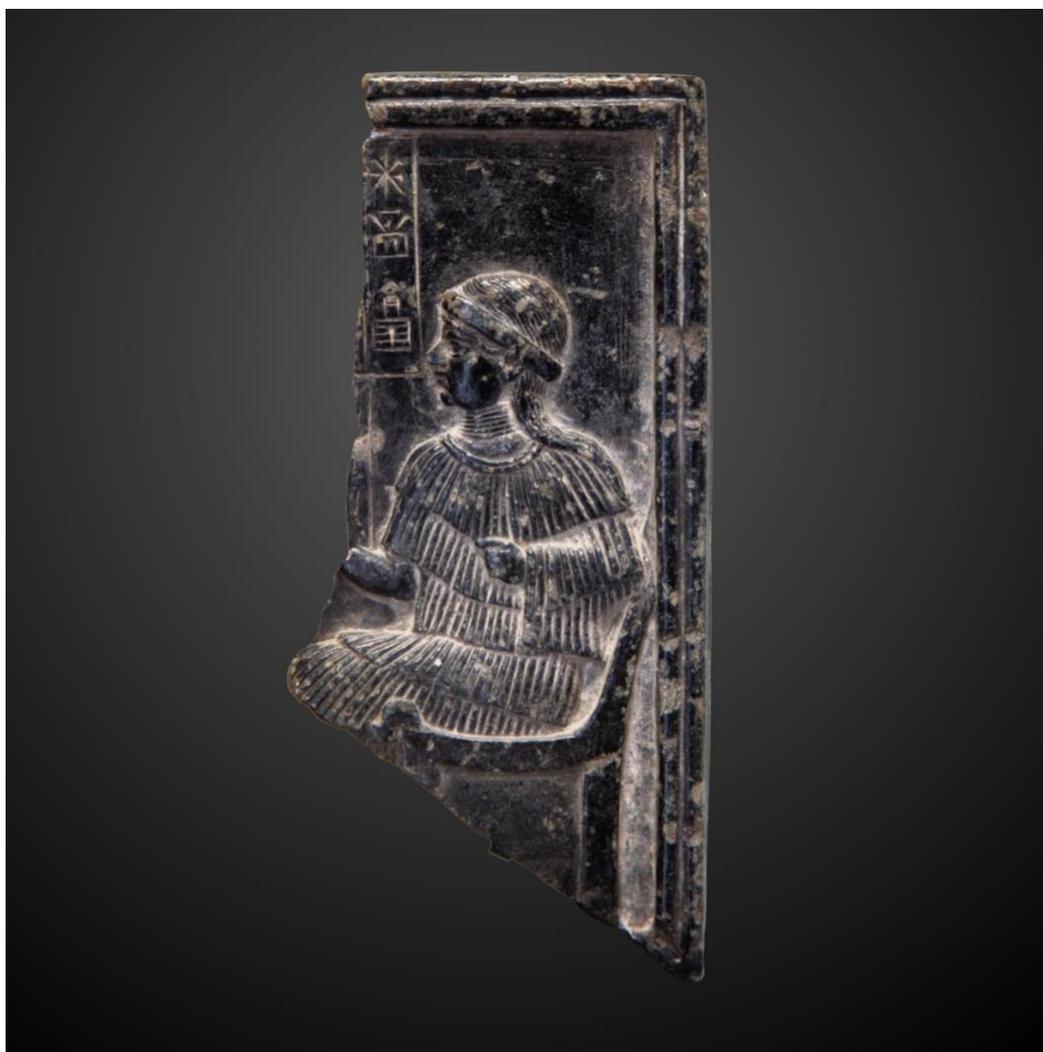


**Figure 3** Gilgamesh slaying the Bull of Heaven. Ancient Mesopotamian terracotta relief, ca. 2250 – 1900 BCE.

The shadow figure of Enkidu is structurally replaced, in the epic, by a series of representations of guiding figures that assist Gilgamesh on his initiatory journey. Dr. Henderson sees them as symbols of the guiding Self. "The realization of the Self is essentially a redemption of the shadow," says Dr. Henderson. "The closer we come to

the Self, the more we become ourselves." (JLH) As Gilgamesh sets out on his journey in search of everlasting life, Ninsun, the mother of Gilgamesh, prays for his safety and success. "Ninsun represents the power of the inner feminine. And prayer is meaningful [here] because it shows, in the myth itself, the discrimination between the personal and the archetypal Mother. She prays to Shamash that he may overthrow the Mother. The personal mother helps the son to overcome the archetypal Mother within himself."

(JLH)



**Figure 4** ARAS: 2Bf.050. Bas-relief of Ninsun, mother of Gilgamesh. Fragment of a steatite carving, ca. 21st century BCE (Neo-Sumerian), Louvre, Paris, France.

Some people read the Gilgamesh Epic as a metaphor describing the overthrow of prehistoric matriarchal political systems by patriarchal political systems, but Dr. Henderson avoids this controversial interpretation stating that, "We do not know if matriarchal or patriarchal systems really existed in ancient times."(JLH) Instead he focused on the psychological implications of the epic.

Dr. Henderson's discussion of the mythologem of the hero was previously elaborated in a passage in Man and His Symbols (1964)<sup>2</sup> in which he stated, "Over and over again one hears a tale describing a hero's miraculous but humble birth, his early proof of superhuman strength, his rapid rise to prominence or power, his triumphant struggle with the forces of evil, his fallibility to the sin of pride (hybris), and his fall through betrayal or a 'heroic' sacrifice that ends in his death." (p.110) The mythologem of the trickster represents "the first, rudimentary stage in the development of the hero myth, in which the hero is instinctual, uninhibited and often childish." (p.113) The mythologem of the more developed hero is one in which the hero overcomes great obstacles with strength and cunning to win the treasure hard to attain. The mythologem of initiation is one in which the initiate makes a heroic sacrifice or suffers a symbolic death, is transformed and is reborn anew.

In the epic of Gilgamesh, Enkidu's death is the heroic sacrifice that marks, not the end of the hero, but the end of the mythologem of the hero. As Dr. Henderson stated, "All hero myths end in death or inactivity of the hero. [The heroes] are put in their place or they die." (JLH) Yet the end of this mythologem is the beginning of the mythologem of

---

<sup>2</sup> Jung, C.G. et al. *Man and his Symbols*. Doubleday, 1964.

initiation. The heroic mythologem is one of overcoming an obstacle through strength and cunning to win the treasure hard to attain. The mythologem of initiation, on the other hand, requires the initiate to submit to a power outside his or her conscious will and suffer a symbolic death, transformation and rebirth which deflate the heroic ambitions and prepare the initiate to assume his or her own mortal life with all the wonders, joys, suffering and limitations associated with such a life.

It bears repeating that one of Dr. Henderson's most creative contributions to analytical psychology is his establishment of the distinctions between and the sequencing of the mythologems of the trickster, the hero, and the initiate. As he stated in Thresholds of Initiation (1967)<sup>3</sup>, "In normal development the trickster cycle is superseded by a hero cycle in which an archetypal father-figure seems to replace the original mother-figure or world of matriarchal consciousness. Both trickster cycle and hero cycle are in turn superseded or transformed by the appearance of the initiation archetype, which appears to put an end to the self-perpetuating tendency of these two cycles." (p.37)

As the mythologem of the hero comes to an end, in the epic of Gilgamesh, the mythologem of initiation begins. Gilgamesh travels a long distance and overcomes great obstacles only to meet failure in two comparatively easy tasks - one to stay awake for seven days and the other to hang on to the herb of rejuvenation. He fails both of these tasks. Eternal life is not for the kind of man who needs his sleep and eternal youth is not for the man of the world. But there is more to this failure as Dr. Henderson pointed out. "The failure of initiation is a part of the mythologem of initiation. Within the

---

<sup>3</sup> Henderson, Joseph L. *Thresholds of Initiation*. Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1967.

mythologem of initiation there is bound to be failure and success and the reason for that is that its always too easy to rationalize our apparent success, identify with it and then simply go back to being heroes again.... So failure in initiation is a caution to avoid that."

(JLH)

Unlike the ancient Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh, which begins with the mythologem of the hero and finishes with the mythologem of initiation, the Ancient Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone, within the context of the Eleusinian Mysteries, illustrates the mythologem of initiation with a different outcome. Where the epic of Gilgamesh ends on an ironic note with Gilgamesh relinquishing his heroic quest for immortality and returning to the world of people and the city, the story of Demeter and Persephone is a story of separation and reunion - death and renewal.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Sanctuary of Demeter at Eleusis, University of Warwick.

<https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/classics/intranets/students/modules/greekreligion/database/hypaaq/>



**Figure 5** ARAS:3Ka.009. A scene from the Eleusinian Mysteries initiation rite. Terracotta plaque, 400 BCE, found in Eleusis, Greece, now at National Archaeological Museum, Athens.

In this myth, Demeter, the mother, and Persephone, her daughter, joyfully orbit one another in a mother-daughter union until Hades kidnaps Persephone and drags her down into the Underworld. Demeter goes into mourning, during which she avoids her duties as Mother Nature. The world grows cold, the animals fail to reproduce, and the leaves fall from the trees. A deathly winter takes hold. When Persephone is finally

returned to her mother, Demeter restores nature in an explosion of fertility and rejuvenation. Persephone's return, however, is based on the condition that she return to Hades in the Underworld for part of every year. Her descent into the Underworld and Demeter's mourning are heralded by the onset of winter and her return to the world is marked by the onset of spring.

"Initiation" says Dr. Henderson, "means being freed from excessive heroism." (JLH) In the myth of Demeter and Persephone, the goddesses are involved with a power outside themselves - an influence other than their will - and the focus of the associated initiation rites is less on what the initiate can do and more on what he/she can allow. As Dr. Henderson noted in his review of Kerényi's Eleusis, the archetype of the 'Mother and Daughter' represents "a universal experience of death and rebirth appropriate for all the mystai [initiates]. (Journal of Analytical Psychology Vol. 13)<sup>5</sup> The submission to death and rebirth is what facilitates the transformation of the initiate from a willful little hero with inflated ambitions to a capable, yet humble, adult.

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://acrobat.adobe.com/id/urn:aaid:sc:VA6C2:dcb749ea-f698-45c9-80b3-09731600b7eb>



**Figure 6** ARAS: 3Ja.071. Demeter and Persephone, with a youth. Marble relief, 450-440 BCE, found in Eleusis, Greece. At the National Archaeological Museum, Athens, Greece, no. 126.

While Gilgamesh makes heroic efforts to achieve his inflated ambition of immortality, Demeter and Persephone, and the initiates who follow their example, allow themselves to "submit to a process that is beyond anything heroic." (JLH) They are "in the power of

something greater than themselves." (JLH) Abandoning heroic willfulness and inflated ambition they symbolically die and are reborn transformed. This transformation allows them to more comfortably embrace their joys and sorrows, live within their mortal limitations, walk up to the edge of the unknown and allow themselves to wonder what may lie beyond.

Dr. Henderson's September 1994 presentation on the mythologem of initiation was a delightful elaboration of his very first lecture on Initiation Rites presented in April 1939 before the Analytical Psychology Club of New York City. It was in that first presentation that he stated, "[W]henver we encounter such rites either among the primitives themselves or in the dreams of modern people their purpose is to throw the initiate into life..." (p.14) He explained that initiation rites of the young throw the initiate into the world. They are exoteric initiations. But there are also initiatory processes that throw the initiate inward on a path of individuation in the second half of life. They are esoteric initiations. More recently, in his book review (S.F. Jung Institute Library Journal, Vol. 10, No. 3, 1991) of Rivkah Schärf Kluger's book The Archetypal Significance of Gilgamesh, Dr. Henderson said, "The essence of initiation is a surrender to one's basic humanity with all its limitations; no wish for god-likeness anymore!"<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Henderson, Joseph L. "An Ancient Modern Man." S. F. Jung Institute Library Journal, Vol. 10, No. 3, p. 7, 1991.