THE STUDY OF MYTH, ARCHETYPE AND SYMBOL: WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Mr. Devine – English 11

It is through these three that we are able, as everyday people, to talk about the big themes of life.

All of those big themes are either questions one can easily ask oneself or situations one might find oneself in, because they are so human – so common to people on the planet. That’s why they are useful. It’s like tracking a wild animal. You can see which way it’s going. If you know the nature of something, then you know how to handle it. You know which way to move in order to go where you need to go. This is why these three persist in human life.

What is a Myth?

- A myth is a story which has its roots in the natural world and which explains why the world is the way it is and how humans can participate successfully in it. It is passed down through oral tradition, and reveals some basic, universal truth, often through the use of symbols and archetypes.

What is an Archetype?

- Archetypes are the primordial personality patterns through which the basic characters of the created world act in order to perform the drama of creation. They are like blueprints around which specific patterns of personality traits constellate. These primordial (pre-existing) personalities occur at every stage of human history, because they originate in a time before human history started.

- We know them, just like all our ancestors before us knew them. We call them the King, the Magician, the Thief, the Healer, the Queen, the Warrior, the Earth Mother, The Trickster, the Rebel, the Prostitute, The Destroyer to name but a few.

What is a Symbol?

- An object, person, idea or action that represents or stands for something else, especially a material object used to represent something abstract or something having multiple possible meanings.

- Please note: A symbol cannot be an abstraction. Rather, a symbol is the thing that points to the abstraction. In Poe’s “The Raven,” death isn’t the symbol, the bird is. In Crane’s The Red Badge of Courage, courage isn’t the symbol; blood is. Symbols are usually objects, but actions can also work as symbols—thus the terms symbolic gesture and symbolic act.

Source: grammar.about.com/od/rs/g/symbolterm.htm

What is Ritual?

- Ritual starts with the creation of sacred space most often for the purpose of regeneration of life. (The Ghost Dance was to bring back the ancestors of Native Americans and to save the existing Natives from the white power structure). This gives the people the ability to have an active role in the continuation of the life of the planet and the cosmos. This is the participation mystique, whereby the dancer/pray-er/singer/seeker connects to the fundamental powers of life (and death). The ritual is meant to activate a specific energy within the performer/invoker.
The second function of ritual is to activate the archetype. The ritual brings the energy of the archetype to you, so that you may take on those characteristics (like Lady McBeth asking "Unsex me here!"). That is what the singer is doing in the Hunting Song – he is becoming the blackberry bird that is the friend of the deer. He is asking for that cloaking. That is invoking an archetype.