



Excerpt from

Jane Eyre's Sisters

How Women Live and Write the Heroine's Story

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CHAPTER 1

The Wandering Heroine

[She was] a being who had been cast upon herself; a female Robinson Crusoe, as unaided and unprotected, though in the midst of the world, as that imaginary hero in his uninhabited island . . . to be rescued from famine and death by such resources as she could find, independently, in herself.

—Fanny Burney, *The Wanderer*

THE STORY OF A WOMAN who must travel from place to place searching for love or freedom or answers has been told for centuries. Fanny Burney, an English novelist who wrote in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, named one of her novels *The Wanderer* in honor of her heroine Juliet Granville, who flees from France by herself and learns how to survive on her own in England. Burney's description of her heroine applies equally well to Jane Eyre and many other famous fictional women.

Psyche of Roman myth travels alone across the wilderness and descends to Hades to win back her husband, Cupid. Vasilisa the Beautiful, a central figure in Russian fairy tales (who is also called “the Virgin Traveler”), goes alone into the forest to win aid from the fearsome witch Baba Yaga. Sethe of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* walks away from slavery; a century later, Celie of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* walks away from bondage of a different kind. These are just a few of the myriad of stories about a wandering heroine who must rely primarily upon herself. Clearly, she is a figure of archetypal status.

Archetypes

In today's parlance, an *archetype* means a trope, a stock character such as the Hero, the Innocent Child, the Prostitute with the Heart of Gold, the Wise Old Teacher, and so on. Pioneering depth psychologist Carl Gustav Jung had a different take, however. He believed that archetypes originate from our instinctive reactions to life.¹ James Hillman, the founder of archetypal psychology, saw

archetypes as representing the deepest patterns of psychological function—even, perhaps, the “roots of the soul.”² For him, archetypes represent styles of being, ways we live out or express a particular instinctive energy in the world. Much as we might like to think differently, we are not rational or objective in our initial reactions to things. Instead, we react much like an animal would, out of a basic feeling such as anger or fear, hunger or sexual desire, or an urge to protect. These feelings tell us whether we should run away or fight, whether we should protect something or try to have sex with it—or eat it—or whether we can safely ignore it. But because we humans also have a thinking forebrain, when we feel these instincts we come up with an idea or image to explain them. These images are what Jung called “archetypal images.” They are our attempts to express that instinctive energy to ourselves and others.

Also, because we are all unique individuals, we are capable of creating an endless multiplicity of images to express an archetype. Each image only captures part of the energy. Thus, a literary or cinematic trope is *not* the same thing as an archetype, for the archetype is always going to be much greater than the image.

But as individuals, we often do restrict our ideas about an archetypal energy to just one image. Our instinctive reactions are colored by our prior experiences, biases, and personal blind spots. We tend to connect experiences that *feel* similar. When we see a person we have met before, for example, or perhaps even someone who looks or acts much the same, we remember our earlier experiences with the first person as well as feelings and ideas we hold about him or her. But those old ideas may have nothing at all to do with how the second, “similar” person is behaving in the moment; and, in fact, the one who reminds us of someone else may have a very different character altogether. Clinging to tightly to just one idea of, for instance, the archetypal energy we associate with “Mother” or motherhood can limit our ability to see different *styles* of maternal behavior and perhaps even lead us to ignore or condemn those different styles.

COMPLEXES

We all know what it’s like to accidentally “push someone’s buttons.” Those “buttons” are what depth psychologists call complexes. According to Freud, complexes are “perversions” of sexual instincts that are “innate in everyone”: we are born with them and can’t change them.³ But post-Jungian psychologists think of a complex as a tangle of emotions that has gotten attached to a specific memory. Every time the memory surfaces, all those feelings come up again. And vice versa: every time a person experiences those feelings, he may remember the original incident that triggered them and even act as if the original incident is happening again.

A complex exists outside of time. In the grip of a complex, we stop reacting to how things really are in the present. One sign that someone is in the grip of a complex is when they say that someone or something is “always” or “never” a certain way, even if there is plenty of evidence to the contrary.

Thus, another way to define *archetype* might be “a complex that many people have in common.” A **complex** (see above box) can be so powerful that it can override our ability to think clearly in a certain situation. Instead, we only perceive what we expect to see and hear.

For example, most people have strong emotions about death, and their particular cultures have images and stories and rituals around the idea of death that reinforce those emotions. Images of the devil speak to a shared belief in and fear of punishment in the afterlife. But those who do not believe in an afterlife or in hell will have no emotional reaction to such images.

Jung believed that all humans have the ability to tap into a shared source of memories and experiences that may have nothing to do with our own personal lives. He called this source the *collective unconscious*—*collective* because it is shared by everyone and *unconscious* because people access this source without consciously thinking, as in when they are dreaming or when inspiration strikes from out of the blue. Jung first got the idea of the collective unconscious by listening to the dreams of his patients. Many of them would describe or draw images similar to those of other cultures, despite the fact that the dreamers knew nothing about those cultures. To Jung, the only explanation was that the dreamers, while asleep, had access to a deeper source of knowledge not available to their conscious minds.

The explanation for why such images occur in different societies may be simpler than Jung thought, however. Humans have different cultures, but biologically we are all pretty much the same. Since our instinctive feelings are similar, in even disparate cultures similar images can emerge—such as a skeletal figure to represent death. Also, although all humans have similar instinctive reactions, the images people use to represent experiences often depend on context. For example, if someone wakes up at night because of a strange noise, their instinctive reaction will likely be a sense of danger. The image or concept that the forebrain attaches to this feeling of danger might be *intruder* if the person is inside her home, or *bear* if she is camping in the woods (or, if she lives in the Congo, *lion*).

Thus the *intruder*, *bear*, and *lion* are all archetypal images, symbols that the forebrain creates in response to the instinctive reaction of danger. Once again, archetypal images are not the same as the archetype itself. Images are the way we try to express the *feeling* of the archetype. The archetype itself cannot be contained in a single image, because the same instinctive feeling can give rise to many different expressions of it. I believe that our endless capacity to express the same ideas in different images explains why people tell the same stories over and over, changing them a little each time, or make movies of the same popular story every few years with a different cast, or paint the same scene again and again.

Archetypal images *always* fall short of what we want to express; they never quite capture the totality of the archetypal energy. People retell old stories with new archetypal images in the ongoing attempt to convey important ideas and feelings to each other.

The Archetype of the *Aletis*

What is a heroine? Some have criticized the word *heroine* itself for being a diminutive form of *hero*, the diminutive implying that a heroine is not the equal of a hero but a smaller, less impressive character. It's true that female protagonists of most women's stories are usually not heroic in the same sense that a hero is. They don't tend to accomplish some big, nearly impossible, death-defying deed. Their bravery is of a different kind. But that doesn't mean it is any less impressive.

Some writers have tried to come up with a better name for the heroine, but many of them are still based on hero, like *she-ro*, *female hero*, and *hera*. Fortunately, there is a better choice. Classics scholar Deborah Lyons found that ancient Dionysian rituals used *aletis*, the Greek word for “wanderer,” to mean a heroine.⁴ Not surprisingly, this word has already found its way into popular culture (popular culture is always ahead of the scholars when it comes to recognizing and portraying new archetypal characters). Fantasy author Jo Clayton wrote her *Diadem from the Stars* series about a woman named Aleytys who wanders from planet to planet having adventures; one of the mutant heroines of Marvel Comics’ X-Men franchise is also named Aleytys.

Still, *heroine* does mean a female protagonist of a story, and it’s the word most of us are used to when talking about such a character. Also, the phrase “the heroine’s journey” has become a popular way to refer to these stories. Therefore, in this book I use both *heroine* and *aletis* to describe the protagonist of stories about women who must wander in search of themselves and their true place in the world.

Men also write the *aletis* story. In his second-century work *Metamorphoses*, Lucius Apuleius wrote about Psyche, who must wander the earth and even descend to Hades in her quest to become, eventually, a goddess. In *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare gave us Viola, a woman who disguises herself as a man to survive in a hostile land. Daniel Defoe took *Moll Flanders* through many adventures to the New World. Charles Dickens put aside his usual submissive, sticky-sweet heroines in his last completed novel, *Our Mutual Friend*, to give us Lizzie Hexam, a woman with the moral strength to run away from an attractive, would-be seducer and the physical strength to rescue him from drowning. Today, Alexander McCall Smith writes about believable women struggling with real-life issues as the heroines of his *Ladies No. 1 Detective Agency* series and the *Isabel Dalhousie* series.

Male fantasy and science fiction writers love spunky heroines. J. R. R. Tolkien created the prototype for today’s warrior princesses when he created Eowyn of *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien’s fellow British fantasy writer Terry Pratchett writes many wonderful heroines, including the fearless twelve-year-old nascent witch, Tiffany Aching, who defeats her first demon in *The Wee Free Men* by the practical expedient of bopping it on the head with her mother’s frying pan. Another daring twelve-year-old is Lyra Belaqua, heroine of Phillip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* series, whose fearless nature leads her across a magical bridge to other worlds and eventually down into the land of the dead, where she changes the very nature of reality.

Pratchett’s *Wyrd Sisters* series also features a pair of elderly witches, Granny Weatherwax and Nanny Ogg, who are equal to any challenge thrown at them, whether it be vampires, scheming kings, or snotty adolescents. Pratchett’s heroines are rarely beautiful; some are built on a larger scale, others are flat-chested and awkward; one is a werewolf-turned-cop; but all of them possess an inner strength that eventually wins the day (and, often, the heart of a decent man).

All these examples lead me to believe that the *aletis* represents a feminine archetype every bit as important as the masculine archetype of the hero. This is why people keep writing her story, trying to put down in words something felt and understood unconsciously, something important about women.