

ARTICLE**Interpreting Vergil's "Orpheus in the Underworld": Comparing Structuralism and Carl Jung's Archetypal Theory****Sean Okawa**

Department of Biology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, CANADA

The myth, "Orpheus in the Underworld" from Vergil (*Georgics*, 4.453-4.527, translated in Trazskoma et al., 2004) is one of the many myths to feature the concept of *katabasis*, defined as "descent to the Underworld" (Herrick, 2014). This myth can be analyzed by two different approaches: The first is structuralism, and the second is Carl Jung's theory on the "collective unconscious" (Dowden, 1992, pp. 17-23). Despite the validity of both methods, I will, in this paper, argue that Jung's archetypal theory better unveils the intent and drive behind this myth. In the 1950's, Claude Levi-Strauss developed a methodology to uncover the meaning of myths: he believed that myths were a way by which the ancients raised cultural concerns and assuaged them. This perspective was coined as "structuralism" and involved deconstructing myths into their central, interrelated ideas; these ideas were then addressed individually (Levi-Strauss, 1963, pp. 213). On the other hand, Jung's archetypal theory is based on the "collective unconscious", the belief that all members of the human race have a subconscious set of ideas or "archetypes" which become expressed through myth. This expression may differ from culture to culture, and interpretations may vary. However, the core meaning is retained across cultures (Dowden, 1992, pp. 17-23).

The myth "Orpheus in the Underworld" portrays the protagonist, Orpheus losing his wife Euripides to the Underworld. A grieving Orpheus journeys to the underworld in a vain attempt to rescue his wife. Orpheus "[enters] the jaws of Taenarum, the deep doorway of Dis, and the grove shrouded in black terror" (*Georgics* 4.453-4.527). He passes through the many tiers of underworld security and reaches Plouton successfully. Orpheus successfully convinces Plouton to send Euripides up to the mortal realm, though Plouton issues one condition: Orpheus must not look back as he and Euripides leave the underworld. Tragedy strikes when Orpheus is "seized

by a sudden madness" and succumbs to the desire to look upon his lover; "his hard toil was wasted, his compact with the pitiless tyrant broken" (*Georgics* 4.453-4.527). The punishment for this is Euripides's return to the Underworld and eternal separation from Orpheus. He is overcome with grief for the rest of his life, until, he is brutally murdered (*Georgics* 4.453-4.527).

If the method of structuralism is applied to the myth of Orpheus, one can see that cultural problems are both addressed and rationalized. The myth is analogous with the real life concept of losing a loved one to death or going to great lengths to save a loved one. A possible interpretation of the myth may be that in ancient times the Greeks created the myth of Orpheus in order to express their feelings of despair at the demise of their lover. This myth was an attempt to document the fragility of human life and how every human being at some point becomes victim to life's natural biological processes. When citizens hear of, and can identify with an honourable, pitiable, and valiant main character, they can rationalize regarding the fact that nobody on earth escapes life's calamities.

Though this interpretation is valid, one could also argue that "Orpheus in the Underworld" does not fully accomplish what a myth should from the view of structuralism. The myth of Orpheus may address the need to portray a cultural concern, but does not necessarily alleviate this concern. For example, if the intent of this myth was to help the reader come to terms with, and more peacefully accept the concept of death, it does not fully succeed at this goal. The morbid, depressing and traumatic ending could have been made happier, or supported by justification, contrary to the existing reality of Orpheus. On the other hand, this myth can be much better explained if viewed from the psychoanalytic perspective that

our collective unconscious is trying to teach us a lesson, primarily that journeys to the underworld are unsuccessful.

Carl Jung's "collective unconscious", when applied to this myth, would state that the concept of katabasis is an archetypal event that fascinates the collective human subconscious. Jung would argue that in order to grieve the loss of a loved one, a person could fantasize or dream about attempting such a rescue. This concept is common in Greek mythology and even throughout other mythologies around the world. Most notable is the myth "Death of a goddess" from Japanese mythology. In this story, the goddess Izanami dies in childbirth and her husband Izanagi journeys to save her. Similar to Orpheus, Izanagi cannot resist the desire of seeing his loved one and fails to bring her back (Chamberlain, 1932, pp. 40-47). These two myths not only share the concept of katabasis but there is a recurring theme that their journeys are not successful. Jung might argue that this could be attributed to human beings' innate knowledge regarding, and subsequent desire to teach, the lesson that there is an overarching force that decides for us when we are to leave existence on earth.

Of course, Jung's archetypal theory also has its limitations in the interpretation of this myth. There are myths within both Greek mythology and other mythologies which defy the hypothesis of unsuccessful journeys including, but not limited to: Heracles' rescue of Theseus, Odysseus' journey to the underworld, and Persephone's partially successful return (Mikellidou, 2015). However, most of these successful examples centre on the characters journeying to the underworld willingly and returning (not in Persephone's case), making it ambiguous whether conducting katabasis results in death. The supposition that katabasis may not result in the death of the heroes themselves, could possibly support the argument that those who die naturally as in the case of Euripides cannot return to the mortal realm. These arguable differences between the outcomes to these journeys to the underworld do not change the fact that the fundamental concept of katabasis is thoroughly repeated in mythologies around the world. This reaffirms that there is some merit in applying Jung's hypothesis of the human "collective unconscious" to the myth of Orpheus. Therefore, I maintain that despite its own weaknesses, Jung's archetypal theory is the more prominent approach to

this myth.

In conclusion, although both the methods of structuralism and Jung's psychoanalysis have their respective applicability and limitations, the concept of the "collective unconscious" is closest to the myth.

LITERATURE CITED

Dowden, K. (1992). *The uses of Greek mythology. Approaching the ancient world.*

Levi-Strauss, C. (1963). *Structural Anthropology.* New York: Basic Books

Mikellidou, K. (2015). The Katabasis - Motif Revisited. *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies*, 55(2), 329-352.

Chamberlain, B. (Trans.). (1932). *Record of Ancient Matters*, (2). Kobe: J.L. Thompson

Trazskoma, S.M., Scott Smith, R., & Brunet, S.(2004). *Anthology of Classical Myth: Primary Sources in Translation.* Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

