

Archetypal patterns in postmodern identity construction

A cultural approach

Christian Roesler

It is certainly true that on the surface of late modern societies, myths and symbols do not play a major role. Postmodern cultural conditions are characterized by the loss of adherence to common symbols and meanings. Individuals today are confronted with the liberty – but also the necessity – to create their own identities. At the same time public culture via the media now offers a tremendous overload of possible orientations, ideologies, belief systems, fashions etc. for individuals to choose from. The resulting personal self-constructions seem to be not only flexible and multifaceted, but also short-lived and fragmented. Jungians nowadays are confronted with the question: how does this fit with Jung's concept of the Self as an autonomous and preformed force from within, which is grounded in eternal archetypes, directing the individuation process towards unity of the person? Facing the conditions of late modern culture, can Jungians still claim that Jung's ideas of the individuation process, the Self and the archetypes describe psychological realities?

Certainly the conditions of identity construction have changed since Jung's day, even more if we look closer at identity processes taking place on the Internet and in virtual realities. Nevertheless an empirical investigation can show that these identity processes are still influenced by archetypal patterns. Based on Jung's definition of archetype, the concept of the 'archetypal story pattern' was developed as a research method drawing on narrative analysis and biography research to identify these archetypal story patterns in life stories. Jung himself pointed out that mythological patterns can govern the life course of individuals, in most cases unconsciously. The self presentation of a person via narrating the life story or parts of autobiographical material can be influenced or even totally structured by archetypal story patterns which give a specific form as well as a specific meaning to the person's identity (e.g. a 'hero story'). This research strongly confirms Jung's thesis that archaic patterns which can be found in mythology still govern the life courses of modern individuals.