



MAGNUM OPUS: ALBEDO

Module 2: Symbols

QUOTE

Because there are innumerable things beyond the range of human understanding, we constantly use symbolic terms to represent concepts that we cannot define or fully comprehend. This is one reason why all religions employ symbolic language or images. But this conscious use of symbols is only one aspect of a psychological fact of great importance: Man also produces symbols unconsciously and spontaneously, in the form of dreams.”

— C.G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols*

Symbols Lecture and Application 1
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Introduction

Please note that this lecture is the only lecture on Symbols. Over the next four weeks the focus will be the practical symbol work. Included in this document is your first application for this week. Over the course of the next three weeks you will receive the following three applications.

Symbols and symbolization

This module deals with the topic of symbols and symbolization. This is a central, if not the central, concept that you need to grasp if you are to understand Jungian theory. Understanding and learning to apply the symbolic lens will give you access to psychological consciousness proper, liberating you from the tyranny of the literal and enabling meaningful and ongoing dialogue with the unconscious psyche.

The challenge in teaching you this, particularly those of you new to the topic, is not to overwhelm you. It is vast subject and much of Jung's life was dedicated to understanding the significance of symbols and much of his Collected Works to the exposition of symbols and their psychological significance.

The short lecture that follows is meant as only a very brief and necessarily simplified introduction into the subject of symbols and their role in psychic life. This is a area of Jungian theory that we will revisit several times during the course of this programme, and each engagement will take you deeper into the topic. The applications that accompany this module will give you an

opportunity to gain some practical and experiential insight into the power of investigating your own symbolic inventory and applying the symbolic lens in your life.

It is a basic and foundational tenant of depth psychology that when the unconscious expresses itself it does so symbolically. There is a juxtaposition between conscious communication that typically happens in the medium of language, and unconscious communication, which is conveyed in non-semantic symbols, most typically, but not exclusively, images.¹

The fundamental dream theory that emerges from depth psychology is that the unconscious communicates through dreams. When it does, the images that it presents should not be interpreted literally. By viewing the dream symbolically, a deeper psychological dynamic or layer of meaning emerges.

Our discussion of unconscious communication gives rise to the concept of “the imaginal”. The imaginal is the images that arise spontaneously in our imaginations and in our inner lives, or images that we encounter in the world that form a tapestry of symbolic consciousness. That said, symbols are not always or exclusively images. For instance, music has a strong symbolic resonance. One can be, and many of us frequently are, emotionally stimulated by a song or piece of music. Generally, one has a sense of a song being either happy or sad, but without necessarily knowing why that particular piece of

¹ To be completely candid here and not to mislead you, this statement is only partially true. The relationship between symbols and language is more complex than I have suggested by making this rather simplistic comparison. Words are in effect symbols, but a different kind of symbol than the symbols of the unconscious. However, the relationship between language and symbols is not the simple binary I have suggested. For now, though, and for the purposes of introducing you to the subject, to unpack the nuances of the symbol-language juxtaposition or spectrum is impractical and beyond the scope of this lecture. So, I offer you this simple distinction as, if not wholly true, sufficiently true and useful, that you may accept it as a provisional truth and then investigate the topic further should you be so inclined.

music has the emotive effect that it does. It is characteristic of art that it either does, or, at least, aspires to, communicate symbolically.

Why is it that a person loves a particular country, architectural structure, or food? What determines their preference for one animal over others or a body of water or any other thing? There are a set of unconscious associations, layers of meaning, and often archetypal, responses, that are linked to the object, or phenomena, whatever it may be, that invest it with a symbolic character.

A defining characteristic of such a symbol is that it cannot be exhaustively described. It has a meaning which is not only conscious but also unconscious. A basic principle in the discussion on symbols is that they hold meaning which is felt emotively and which is experienced, yet which cannot be fully articulated in language.

A sign contains information that is readily apparent, provided one is familiar with its signifying language. Their meaning is clear without any hidden information. An example of this is traffic signs where it is completely clear what they are communicating and there is little, or nothing, that is not disclosed.

In contrast, the name of a person contains or represents much that is not fully disclosed. Even if the person were to share their life story, there would be aspects that would remain undisclosed. In other words, a name assumes a symbolic characteristic that is not fully disclosed when we use it.

To recap, a symbol differs from a sign in that it contains and expresses an element of the unknown. It has something mysterious about it. In

psychological terms it expresses something beyond the subject's conscious knowledge, i.e. something that is unconscious. Symbols are important for psychoanalysis and Jungian psychology, in particular, because they offer a way of building a bridge to the unconscious. They are the language of the unconscious, bringing us into relationship with more than the content of our conscious mind.

Consciousness is a tremendous gift. Society and civilization would not exist without consciousness. Yet there is frequently something sterile about consciousness. As the Jungian scholar Mark Saban puts it, consciousness left to its own devices will inevitably run into a dead end.² Absolute self-knowledge, were it to exist, would lead to a sterile state of existence. A state where the subject has the sense of exhausted themselves, having mined the mine, where there is nothing left to know or discover. Consciousness can lead to a calcification, a stagnation, the feeling of being unable to transcend a particular state of existence, of being unable to move beyond frustrations or pains or wounds that one has.

Jungian psychology demonstrates that the unconscious offers a way forward, a path to new life where there is a fresh way of experiencing and relating to oneself. Thus, it offers the possibility of a renewed future. Within the unconscious lies the possibility that life can be fertilised through becoming conscious of what was previously unconscious, thereby amplifying the experience of oneself. This path to the unconscious psyche and its possibilities of renewal is through engagement with symbols.

² Mark Saban, Jungian and post-Jungian Clinical Concepts lecture on 'Archetypes and the Unconscious'

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Symbols hold within them the possibility of the realisation that not only the individual subject, but life and the experience of being alive is a much more wondrous and mysterious activity than may have been previously supposed. To quote Hamlet, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

But entry into this space of new possibility, life and meaning – to be reborn and reinvigorated – is through dialogue with the unconscious, back to Hamlet, “And therefore as a stranger give it welcome.

From the perspective of Jungian psychology, this dialogue takes place in the language of the unconscious, that is through symbols. These symbols may typically be expressed imaginatively through images, but also, as I mentioned earlier, through anything that has the capacity to evoke an emotive response. In other words, the symbolic value or charge of the image or object has the ability to provoke, arouse passion, instil fear, mesmerize or stimulate other emotions, without us knowing exactly why this occurs. The idea is that even though certain feelings and associations are expressed in response to the symbol, the relationship with and understanding of the symbol is not thereby fully disclosed. This is because this relationship is deeper than that which can consciously be articulated.

To begin it is easier to examine collective symbols. For example, religions contain many classic, iconic images such as the cross of Christianity. This symbol is easily recognisable as a representation of Christianity. It is a clearly a symbol of the Christian Church. There is a sense of knowing what a cross means in this sense, that, in other words, it signifies Christianity. However, a

devout Christian, immersed deeply in the Christian faith, may experience the symbol of the cross quite differently. The cross becomes a mysterious thing, and it goes beyond the capacity of language to describe the relationship that it symbolises. All significant religious icons or symbols will have this characteristic about them that somehow the presence of God is contained in the symbol.

The very idea of God is another good example of a symbol. We use the word 'God' glibly in the assumption that we know what it means. In this we display an incredible arrogance since the notion of God transcends our limited capacity of comprehension. In a religious sense, then, God would be the ultimate symbol.

Another great example of a symbol is that of art. What is the test of good art? Some ask what effect a piece of art has, whether it calls to one, or speaks to the appreciator of the piece. If there is indeed something about it that elicits a response it is difficult to say exactly what that is. The art could be described as a beautiful piece, that it is evocative of certain memories, but this still does not explain why it generates the emotional and aesthetic response that it does. What makes it "beautiful" and why does it provoke a particular emotional response?

The above are examples of symbols in a collective sense, or what we mean when we talk about symbols in the external world.

The symbol, or the image (if we view the image symbolically), is a presentation of and from the unconscious to the conscious mind. It is the presentation of the symbolic image that forms a potential bridge between the

conscious and unconscious mind. The presentation of the symbol can arise from the inner world, such as in dreams where an image arises spontaneously, or from the outer world, as when one views a work of art that speaks to you. Whether it arises internally or is external, the symbol presented has unconscious content. It has a meaning that is beyond what is currently known, perhaps even beyond what can be known, consciously. Symbols are the language of the unconscious and the relationship with them is a way of building a bridge to the unconscious.

The following two short stories speak about symbols in a different way that may be useful by way of illustration.

Jacques Lacan was a French psychoanalyst and a famous, sometimes infamous, intellectual. He had an idiosyncratic method of psychoanalysis in that he had no set duration for his sessions. Unlike a typical psychoanalytic session that would last, for example, fifty minutes, Lacan's sessions could be anything from five minutes to an hour. At any point in the session he could say, "Okay, thank you, come and see me tomorrow," or "Come and see me next week," and the client would pay the same rate regardless of how long the session had been.

A philosopher I met once, who was a student of Lacan's, asked him, "When you were in the psychoanalytic hour, or five minutes as the case might be, what is it that you were listening out for?" Lacan responded that he was listening for unsymbolised content, waiting for the moment when this unsymbolised content was presented.

In trying to understand what Lacan meant by unsymbolized content, we need to examine the idea of what makes life meaningful. The process of being alive is meaningful to the degree that there is something of value, or worthwhile, in rising each day and enduring the hardships that life presents. Meaning, however, does not emerge from the literal.³ It is not the vehicle, job, lover, or home that is inherently meaningful. These things become meaningful because they have become symbols in the way that we relate to and experience them.

Lacan would say that psychological life is necessarily symbolized, that it juxtaposed to, in Lacanian terms, the “real”. It is not that the world, things, and objects do not have a meaning in themselves, but that there is a layer of meaning that is unconsciously projected. It is the meaning that emerges from the unconscious of the individual and which is bestowed upon things, that we discuss and are interested in in psychoanalysis. That which the individual is in relationship with that is not meaningful or is traumatically meaningful to them, is what Lacan would interpret as “unsymbolized content”. When it is raw, or empty and is not experienced as meaningful, then the content is essentially unsymbolized.

The second example I want to share with come from the American novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald and his novel *The Great Gatsby*.

The story of *The Great Gatsby* describes a process of symbolisation. As a young man Gatsby met Daisy and the couple fell passionately in love. When Gatsby

³ For those interested in or familiar with the philosophy of language, we can put it this way, meaning, in the sense I am using the term here, is a consequence not of a signifier’s denotative faculty but rather its conative capacity. Here Gottlob Frege’s seminal essay “Über Sinn und Bedeutung” (On Sense and Reference), (1892), is instructive. It is the sense rather than the reference of a term that imbues meaning of the type I am speaking about here.

left to fight in the First World War, it was with the understanding that he would return and marry Daisy. But this did not happen and only later in the story does the reason emerge. Gatsby was from a poor background and did not believe that he was Daisy's social equal. Before he could propose to her he needed to make his fortune. Daisy was quite unaware of his circumstances, knowing only that Gatsby had disappeared from her life. In his absence, the dashing, wealthy and arrogant Buchanan, proposed to Daisy and took her to live in New York. Years later Gatsby, having made his fortune, had the dream of winning the hand of Daisy. He was obsessed by the notion that they were destined to be together, that they truly loved each other and that her marriage to Buchanan was an unfortunate event that only occurred because Daisy did not realize that he was coming back for her.

Gatsby bought a mansion on the opposite side of the bay from the house where Daisy lived. Across the bay he could see her home. He would watch a green light at the end of the pier in front of her house flashing through the mist. This green light became a symbol for him of all of his dreams that would be realized when he was reunited with Daisy.

Through a series of events, Gatsby conspired to meet with Daisy. Initially their interaction was awkward but eventually they reconnect. Scott Fitzgerald writes of Gatsby that

"...there must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams. Not through her own fault but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything. He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion adding to it all the time, getting it

out with every bright feather that drifted his way; no amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man would store up in his ghostly heart.

“If it wasn’t for the mist we could see your home across the bay,” said Gatsby.

“You always have a green light that burns at the end of your dock.” Daisy put her arm in his abruptly but he seemed absorbed in what he had just said.

Possibly it occurred to him that the colossal significance of the light had vanished forever. Compared to the great distance that had separated him from Daisy, it seemed very near to him, almost touching her. It had seemed as close as a star to the moon. Now it was again just a green light on the dock. His count of enchanted things had diminished by one.”

In this really brilliant example of a symbol from Fitzgerald,, we see that for Gatsby it was not the light itself, but what the light represented, that was important to him.

George Bernard Shaw said that there are only two tragedies in life: not getting what we want and getting it. The moment that Gatsby had Daisy the fantasy was over, and he washed back into the realm of the real. Reality never, in a sense, lives up to the fantasy. The symbol exists in the realm of fantasy, always pointing beyond itself. In relationship with the symbol, whatever the symbol is and whatever the interaction with it, there is a sense that there is more to be understood, discovered, or actualized. In other words, the symbol is not completely disclosed.

Our focus in this work is more on the type of symbols that Gatsby had that is the personal rather than collective symbols.

Jung said that,

“... what we are to our inward vision, and what man appears to be sub specie aeternitatis, can only be expressed by way of myth, that is symbolically.”

The real science and art of the process is to discover your own symbols, to examine your personal myth, your unique personal mythology. This process is called individuation and is that of discovering the unique value that you bring to this world. Personal mythological stories are revealed through symbols and images. Although most dreams will of necessity use collective or in Jungian terms, archetypal, symbols, interpretation always involves the dreamer's own association with the dream symbols. That is in fact the starting point of a psychoanalytic interpretation, before, considering the objective, collective and archetypal dimension of the symbols. Collective symbols such as art or religious icons, not only have a meaning that is collective, they have personal and subjective meaning. The questions to be asked are: What are the images and the symbols that speak to you, and what do these symbols reveal about what lives in your soul?

In your search for personal symbols, coming to terms with your own stock of imaginal content, you would look at images that are significant for you. These are the images that animate and draw you into their sphere of influence. They speak to you, evoking an emotional or spiritual response, you experience a movement in your soul life by virtue of this image. They are images that you find fascinating, what Jung called numinous, awe-inspiring, or indicating the presence of the divine.

A characteristic of Jung's psychology is that he was less interested in the developmental causal history of how a person came to be as they are than in where they were going, what called them and what lay in their future. Without dismissing the developmental aspect, he had a teleological view of psychology, being more interested in how things could unfold. The idea here is that the symbol has a teleological character in that it points towards the future. This was beautifully illustrated in the Gatsby story. In as much as Gatsby was in relation to the symbol, his unconscious presented him with a future that was greater than what he currently had, something that would take him beyond where he was.

Our work in the Magnum Opus Programme and the development of your individuation process, or as I like to refer to it, your individuation project, is to help you discover your own symbols. To help you identify your very own world of enchanted things (as Fitzgerald puts it). These are the symbols, the images, of life as yet unlived. Symbols that are able to draw you into their sphere of influence so that you may experience a fuller and more complete version of yourself. Symbols that have the capacity to draw you away from the past and into the future, into that which you may yet become.

Applications for this module:

The applications for this module will run over the next four weeks. Each week will introduce you to a different aspect of symbol work. These applications will help you to grasp the concept of symbols on an experiential level, so I encourage you to take some time to read the instructions and do the applications.

Week 1 Application Guide:

Function 1: Encountering Symbols in the World

Symbolic meaning is found in the external world through projection of unconscious content onto various objects. Objects here refer in the broadest sense to anything that you project onto, whether it is a person, a movie, a picture, a vase, a song, a company, event, or anything really. Whenever there is an emotional response to something, e.g., you really like it or you really hate it or it stays with you for days/weeks/months, it indicates that there is unconscious content within your psyche that has found meaning in that object. The object represents more than what it appears to be “objectively”. There is something unconscious within you that you have located outside of yourself and within the object (symbol) in question, quite possibly because you have not taken conscious ownership of this idea, concept, belief, dream, or goal.

To use a simple example, imagine you are walking through a market and find a stone carving. You hold it in your hand, and it seems as if it is vibrating with

energy. You love the shape and colour. You simply have to buy it. If you don't buy it, the loss remains with you for a long time. This object is a symbol. The meaning is a mystery since it is unconscious. If you worked with this symbol and used your imagination to play with it, you will realise some of the unconscious content that you have projected onto it. It may represent any number of things that you desire - happiness, power, individuality, identity – anything really. The magical process here is in uncovering this symbolic meaning and integrating it into consciousness.

This is part of the process of individuation, the goal of Jungian psychology. To become fully yourself, unique and whole, requires this type of symbolic work since it unearths hidden truths and desires about yourself which will help you to understand and ultimately become who you really are: the most authentic, whole and complete version of your individuality.

As you carry on with your life during the next four weeks, whether you are on the road, in your car, at the mall, outdoors or on the web, make an effort to take notice of things that stand out for you, are numinous in some way or attract your attention. These symbols will give hints to what lies within your unconscious.

Application Week 1:

Whatever you see that contains symbolic meaning for you is authentic. Nothing can be more authentic than an emotional response to an object or idea. This is key to symbol work. Through symbols you access an inner truth and meaning. There are many different types of symbols, we will be examining four different types of symbols over the next four weeks.

Week 1: The magic of meaning that symbols hold.

- a) Take a walk through your house and select one object that you really love. Keep this object with you at work/where you spend most of your time.
- b) Keep this object close to you the whole week and as much as possible, be aware of the feeling it evokes in you.
- c) Let your imagination play with the object and record all memories, ruminations and fantasies that your experience in relation to it.
- d) During the week, reflect on the following.
 - a. Where did you get it?
 - b. What do you think of when you look at it/hold it?
 - c. How does it make you feel?
 - d. What memories are associated with it?
 - e. What does it remind you of?
 - f. Are there any daydreams/fantasies when you look at/hold this object?
- e) Now extrapolate the meaning of this object for you
 - a. Does it contain a fantasy or desire? What is this desire?
 - b. Does it reflect a relationship dynamic that you hold dear?

- c. Is there something missing in your life that this object represents?
- d. Are there any associations with this object that reflects a neglected aspect of yourself?