Using Jungian archetypes in contemporary songwriting education

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ABSTRACT

Archetypes are character prototypes, which manifest, often unconsciously, in cultures around the world. They are now being used consciously in creative industries (including screenplay writing and advertising). In this article I explore how they may manifest unconsciously in contemporary popular songwriting, and describe how I have used them creatively and consciously in teaching songwriting to undergraduate students. I intend to illustrate that archetypes serve successfully in teaching songwriting students how to access creative stimulus, as the metaphorical nature of archetypes often enables students to see things differently and create songs accordingly that feel satisfying and authentic to them. This works best as an emotional, rather than an entirely intellectual, exercise.

INTRODUCTION

The Creative Songwriting module at the Institute for Contemporary Music Performance (ICMP) aims to equip students with the skills to write a repertoire of original songs within a range of thematic, structural and stylistic briefs; key to success is learning to achieve this in a way which is both authentic to the student's own voice, and which communicates compellingly to an audience. Most recently, the module has included the use of archetypes.

Archetypes have roots in Western philosophy (Plato) and psychology (Jung) as universal prototypes or blueprints from which individuals are 'copied'. These character models are fundamental to human experience, have immediately recognisable personality and behaviour traits and are found in legends, literature and movies. Carl Jung described archetypes as 'Forms or images of a collective nature which occur practically all over the earth as constituents of myths and, at the same time, as products of conscious origin' (cited in Jaffe & Jung 1963). Examples include the Hero fighting fiercely for a cause, the Outlaw breaking society's rules and the Ruler reigning (justly or despotically) over their kingdom.

While archetypes are used creatively and consciously in advertising, branding and screenplay writing, there is little evidence of them being used in songwriting; only Kuchner (2009) and Tough (2013) in the US have researched and written about the topic.

Much of this article draws on primary sources, first experimenting with volunteer songwriters to explore to what extent conscious awareness of the archetypes positively affected their songwriting. Following that initial research, archetypes were added to ICMP's teaching syllabus at Level 4 on the BA in Songwriting; feedback from those students is also included to illustrate the positive impact that it had on their creativity and on the authenticity of their writing.

UNDERSTANDING ARCHETYPES

Jung described archetypes as deriving from the collective unconscious: 'an unconscious content that... takes its colour from the individual consciousness in which it happens to appear' (Jung 1969a). They might also be described as 'controlling paradigms or metaphors, the invisible patterns in the mind that control how we experience the world' (Pearson 1991) or 'the stock characters in legend, in movies, in the Bible, in the stories of our lives' (Kuchner 2009). These myths, ideas and characters differ between cultures, but the concept is universally recognisable.

Archetypes appear in art, religion, rites of passage, mythology and literature: we recognise the loving mother who sacrifices herself for her child, the orphan who has to face life alone, the warrior who will fight to the death for a cause, the hedonism of the carefree fun-lover. We unconsciously recognise – and often resonate deeply with – these characters, depending on who we are, what we have gone through in our lives and what stage we are currently at in our own journeys.

Jung used archetypes therapeutically. However, they are now used consciously in other environments, for example in screenplay writing, perhaps most famously in the Star Wars series. Archetypes are also present in corporate and product branding: iconic brands resonate deeply and inspire great loyalty while other brands – with no significant difference in product quality – fail to do so. Successful brands are 'larger than life', and have a 'humanly compelling quality' while unsuccessful ones are 'lifeless stereotypes' (Mark & Pearson 2001).

ARCHETYPES IN SONG

Music too evokes meaning. Murphy (2011) talks about 'a connection with that listener in three-and-a-half minutes that will last forever'. Billy Bragg (2013) described the best love songs as 'making you feel as though someone has been reading your mail' and Davis (1985) describes a singer's role as telling a 'universal truth we already know'. These descriptions indicate archetypal resonance and meaning: 'a good song, just like an effective brand, can evoke an archetype we have inside us' (Tough 2013). 'A good song, just like an effective brand, can evoke an archetype we have inside us. When we hear a song that contains an authentic archetype, the song brings meaning to our lives' (Kuchner 2009).

Jung discovered hundreds of archetypes (1969b). However, Pearson (1991) drew up a model of 12 key archetypes that has been drawn upon by others (eg Mark & Pearson 2001; Kuchner 2009), and which I will explore below.

So far, little research exists on identifying the incidence of Jung's archetypes in contemporary music:

- Kuchner (2009), focusing on archetypes in country music. He noticed eight out of Pearson's 12 archetypes (Innocent, Everyman, Sage, Hero, Lover, Joker, Caregiver, Outlaw) but also said 'all archetypes probably have their places in the world of popular song';

- Tough (2013) referencing Kuchner, but also analysing 136 songs from the US Billboard Hot 100 charts, 1 January 2011 through 30 April 2012, which included 136 songs covering multiple genres (Table 1).

Table 1. Archetypes in US Billboard Hot 100 Charts, 2012, by count and per cent (from Tough 2013)

Everyman	13	10%
Explorer	22	16%
Lover	55	40%
Innocent	2	1%
Rebel	8	6%
Sage	18	13%
Warrior	18	13%

Kuchner's eight archetypes are drawn from just one genre (country music), and Tough identified only seven archetypes in his analysis of the Billboard charts, which represent the most popular contemporary songs. Being mindful that not all songwriting students want to write country or pop music, and as Pearson (1991) identified 12 archetypes in common usage, I chose her full model to work with: Innocent, Orphan, Caregiver, Warrior, Seeker, Lover, Creator, Destroyer, Ruler, Magician, Sage, Jester.

Each archetype brings a set of qualities, feelings and desires, showing both light and darkness. For example, the Innocent brings trust, faith and optimism, wanting to stay safe and loved. They believe anything is possible although this could manifest as denial, or staying in abusive relationships. They help people to keep faith, leave the fast lane and relax, get back to simple pleasures, reminisce and see beauty in life:

'Looking back on when I / Was a little nappy-headed boy / Then my only worry / Was for Christmas what would be my toy...'

('I Wish' by Stevie Wonder, 1976)

Alternatively, the Warrior brings courage, skill and discipline. They confront problems, protect boundaries and defend others. They want to win, so much so that they may lie and cheat. A principled warrior however is ethical, and fights fairly to triumph over evil:

'I got the eye of the tiger, a fighter / Dancing through the fire / 'Cause I am a champion and you're gonna hear me roar.'

('Roar' (Cirkut et al., 2013, sung by Katy Perry)

EXPERIMENTING WITH TEACHING CREATIVITY IN SONGWRITING USING ARCHETYPES

Initial research with songwriters was carried out as part of an undergraduate dissertation to explore a key research question: can teaching conscious awareness of archetypes enhance creativity in songwriting? The approach was influenced by Denscombe's (2003) four defining characteristics of action research:

- a practical approach addressing real-world problems and issues: the aim was to use a teaching process to enhance songwriting creativity;

- change as an integral part of research. 'One of the most common kinds of change involved in action research is at the level of professional self-development.' (Denscombe 2003: 75);

- a cyclical process with feedback loop – the research aimed to assess songwriting approaches before and after an intervention;

- participants being respected and knowledgeable partners in the research.

In an initial teaching session I taught 16 volunteer participants the 12-archetype model, illustrated how this manifested in existing songs by using examples, and tested participants' understanding of each archetype using a questionnaire on song lyrics. Together we explored ways of bringing the archetypes to conscious awareness through three different processes:

- Working alone to draw images to reflect the different archetypes (eg one person drew a baby to represent the Innocent);

- Using a form of 'daydreaming' with participants working in pairs to ask each other key questions, eg 'get in touch with the part of yourself that brings you metamorphosis, revolution and growth' (Destroyer), and to notice and speak out loud what came to mind when the question was asked;

- Working in groups to contemplate an archetype and create thought showers of words and phrases that seemed to suit it, eg for Magician: 'perspective, ripple effects, metaphysical, rabbit out of hat'.

I also advised them to be mindful of archetypes when watching television programmes or advertisements, seeing films, listening to songs, etc.

Participants were asked to write a song based on one or two archetypes, chosen for any reason they wanted. They were then asked to complete a questionnaire about their experience of writing, and I conducted semi-structured interviews with four of them (the two most and least satisfied with their experience).

THE EXPERIENCE OF CHANNELLING ARCHETYPES

Following that exercise, 12 of the 16 participants reported feeling satisfied with their song, nine could see themselves using this song in some way, and seven felt it was different from something they would normally write. A middle-aged participant I will call 'Gina' said:

'The archetype chose me... I knew what this was about immediately but

had never recognised or formulated the need to think about/eliminate the buried anger and frustrations that I suddenly recalled.'

Participants 'channelled' archetypes in various ways. Those most satisfied described multiple methodologies (painting, poetry, research, discussion, daydreaming, reading notes, listening to music). 'Harry', a man in his mid-20s, explained his experience:

'Instead of writing as myself I imagined being a Sage character, majestic and respectable... which then freed me to be as outlandish as I chose.'

Doing so seemed to facilitate the creative process, as 'Billy', a 40-year-old man, described:

'Once I made that connection between the archetype and how real people express it, the song almost wrote itself.'

The successful process seemed also to channel an unconscious form of creativity. As 'Gina' said:

'In this case, the idea came (almost) fully formed, in its most perfect form.'

More satisfied participants said that the archetypes gave them focus, and many wrote surprisingly different songs, or ones that were particularly raw and emotional. As 'Ken', a man in his early 30s, said:

'Just thinking about that character cuts to the heart of my love for writing "tears and all".'

Some found the experience easier and faster than usual. 'Murray', in his late 30s, said:

'I felt free and almost a bit like in trance. So amazing.'

Others found it difficult at first until they got beyond concept and into a character or story.

Ten of the 16 participants said the process was different from how they would normally write, saying that the archetypes focused their thinking and gave characters

depth. 'Ken' said:

> 'I was very surprised at myself in how deep I went with the imagery and story... I gave the archetype a life and a story to tell in the song and opened him up to human emotions to make him feel real to me.'

The most enthusiastic participant was 'Freddie' in his 20s, who said he accessed deep thoughts and emotions, creating more meaning and stimulating multiple song ideas:

> 'I feel it made expressing my feeling in words easier.'

The least enthusiastic, however, was 'Norman', in his late 50s, who felt it was more of an intellectual exercise:

> 'It did not feel natural to me, but that is not a bad thing, it's just different to what I would normally do.'

Overall, the exercise was viewed as stimulating, fun and personally challenging, with 'Ken' going so far as to say:

> 'One of the best writing exercises I have ever taken part in.'

Of the 16 participants, 10 said they would definitely be using archetypes again, with another two saying that they probably would.

Where participants chose archetypes either randomly or intellectually, they tended to be less satisfied, and to consider the product less authentic, than those who selected an archetype because they resonated with it. This all indicates that mere intellectual understanding of the archetypes (a 'thinking' approach) is less likely to connect with the unconscious, where Csikszentmihalyi (1996) saw the "aha!" moment as stemming from, than the emotional resonance of a 'feeling' response. This may be especially important when using archetypes for the first time and with a relatively short introduction to them: greater exposure, study and understanding may make it easier to experiment with and expand the archetypal repertoire.

This is not to demean the importance of rationality and objectivity as part of the creative process: it clearly plays a part in refining work. Archetypes might in fact be used at a later stage to edit or validate a song to ensure it communicates clearly. One participant, 'Edie', in her 30s, stated:

> 'Rather than specifically starting from an archetype, I am currently more drawn to the idea of viewing a song in progress through the lens of archetype, ie using it as a tool in the development of the song rather than the conception; helping me to understand the roles (and hence tone of voice) of characters within a song.'

Those who had most positive experiences tended to reflect deeply and consciously on the archetypes after training, and had internalised them by applying them to, for example, song repertoire. This contemplation and deeper understanding made it easier to channel their chosen archetypes.
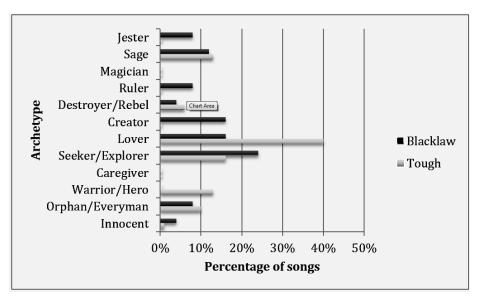
Prior to teaching, participants seemed to have unconsciously written 31% of their usual songs based on the Lover archetype, and a further 14% based on Orphan. (Other archetypes were not so easy to assess given the broad subject matters stated.) This broadly equates with Tough's (2013) findings that 40% of songs in the Billboard charts were based on Lover, and 10% on Everyman (Orphan). Interestingly, for the post-teaching songs, proportions of both archetypes dropped to 16% Lover and 8% Orphan, enabling more variety in archetypes than was exhibited in the Billboard charts. This indicates that conscious use of archetypes enables a broader range of them to be accessed, although some remain consistently absent in both studies, as shown in Figure 1, comparing the results in this study with Tough's analysis:

TEACHING ARCHETYPES TO SONGWRITING UNDERGRADUATES

I subsequently joined the faculty of the ICMP and became module leader for Creative Songwriting. Since 2017 archetypes have formed part of the syllabus of the Level 4 Writing Techniques class for the BA in Songwriting; they are introduced halfway through the second semester as a creativity technique. Classes are taught according to the methodology described above, but over a more extended period: instead of a single session covering 12 archetypes, teaching takes place over three two-hour lessons covering four archetypes each time, with writing assignments each week. We have

Figure 1: Comparison of post-teaching songs (Blacklaw 2014) with Tough's (2013) findings

been able to extract feedback on the impact of the teaching from students' end-year reflective statements, in which their learning about archetypes featured frequently.

Using archetypes seemed to have benefits in several ways. Many students find writing in collaboration challenging at first, but, for one student, 'Tony', in his early 20s, it clearly became a smoother process when using an archetype:

'Having the common ground of an archetype... made the process far easier and more fun than I had imagined co-writing would be and I learned finding the common ground is key for me to co-write.'

Using archetypes enabled another student to bring more variety into their repertoire. 'Alison', in her late teens, said:

'Recently, I noticed that most of my songs used Jung's orphan archetype as they all seemed to be very vulnerable and depressive, so I have started exploring other archetypes such as the Sage and the Lover in order to expand my repertoire.'

It also seems to have encouraged students to think more deeply about their writer's intention and the song's content. 'Deepak', in his early 20s, said:

'My approach to the writing process has changed in that I now take a much stronger, more active or decisive approach when deciding on themes, archetypes

or the general message of the song, as opposed to before, when I would simply write words that fit into the sounds and melodies of hooky tunes.'

As teachers we seek to create an environment where we encourage songwriting students to be both experimental and authentic; using Jung's archetypes as a creativity tool seems to support those aims, allowing students to deliberately explore topics outside their comfort zone, as well as giving them a way to connect more deeply, both with each other and with their intended audiences.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Archetypes are about expressing, and resonating with, the deep and common meanings that are behind the wide variation of human experience; student songwriters are learning their creative craft in order to do the same thing. Although on a small scale, the research indicated – and this has been confirmed by subsequent teaching experience – that teaching archetypes can indeed provide students with positive creative stimulus. Perhaps no single creativity technique can work for everyone, but this small study indicated a relatively high satisfaction rate. The metaphorical nature of archetypes seems to enable students to see things differently and create songs accordingly; for some the connection is instant, while for others a lengthier incubation seems to be useful in

processing the archetypes. However, the impact is most notable where students develop an emotional understanding of and authentic connection with at least some of the archetypes, rather than an intellectual understanding of most or all of them.

Depending on personality and experience, some archetypes will be more immediately attractive and resonant than others; students might start with those, and only move on to less immediately compelling archetypes once they are sure they thoroughly understand them, and have experimented successfully with those that come more naturally. Like any tool, its effectiveness will depend in part on the skill and enthusiasm of both student and teacher, and on the processes used to teach. Using archetypes is not intended to substitute for a songwriter's own authentic truths, but it is a way of reaching and channelling them, if the songwriter is willing to take that honest and personal journey. ∎

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