

The Divine Child and the Hero

Introduction

Some years ago Dr. Ravenna Helson, investigating the research style of outstanding men and women mathematicians, showed that even in such an objective domain as that of mathematics, it was possible to distinguish two types of creativity related to sex. For the two approaches to problem solving that she identified in her research, she used the expressions “patriarchal” and “matriarchal,” as a tribute to Erich Neumann and as a way of indicating the similarity between these two types of creativity and the types of consciousness that Neumann labeled in this manner. Though men on the whole are more patriarchal—systematic, purposeful—and women more matriarchal—open to intuitions, responsive to the fruit of unconscious elaboration—among both men and women there were differences in the extent to which they evidenced either approach.

Wanting to explore the expression of matriarchal and patriarchal types of creativity in a field different from that of mathematics, Dr. Helson turned to the activity of writers—more specifically to writers of fantasy for children. Such fantasy appeared to constitute a fairly homogeneous medium, and more one which could be analyzed for structure and content.

Dr. Helson drew a sample of seventy books for children (excluding work regarded as appropriate for children under eight years old) written between 1930 and 1968 and submitted them to a number of judges in order to obtain ratings of excellence. Two rater-analysts described the extent to which the books evidenced the presence of certain traits in their style or argument.

The books having been rated on a number of attributes, the data is fed into a computer in order to perform a cluster analysis. This analysis involves, first, a calculation of intercorrelations between traits or variables. Intercorrelations answer questions such as: does the presence of ogres in books tend to go together with the presence of princes, or vice versa? Is realism related to a happy end or a sad one? Is there any parallel between the expression of tenderness in a book and the presence of animals among its characters?

Once all the possible intercorrelations between the given elements have been computed, it is possible to determine whether such elements (some of which go together with some others) form, like stars, “constellations”—groups in which every element is related to any other—and how many of these constellations there are. Such constellations are what in statistical jargon is known as “clusters.”

Two clusters were distinctly apparent in Dr. Helson’s analyses. One of them comprised principally the elements of aggression, achievement, the conquest of opposing forces or evil beings, the predominance of plot over character description, and the presence of magical elements of a magical world in such a plot. The other comprised the following elements: expression of tender feelings, leisurely tempo, realism, and the predominance of character description and setting over plot.

The traits of cluster I were most apparent in the writing of men, those of cluster II in the writing of women; for this reason, aside from the nature of the traits in each cluster, Dr. Helson called cluster I “patriarchal” and cluster II “matriarchal.”

Interestingly, however, the results showed that the two tendencies in style were not incompatible. The more creative books among the whole sample rated by the judges scored high in one or the other of these trait-clusters, but, particularly, the best books appeared to be expressive of both, even though one or the other would predominate.

Among men and women writers, both types of writing could be found. Characteristically “patriarchal” books written by men were:

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, by C.S. Lewis;
The Hobbit, by J.R.R. Tolkien;
The Book of Three by Lloyd Alexander;
The Sword and the Stone by T.E. White.

Characteristically “matriarchal” books written by men are the following:

The Little Prince by Antoine de Saint-Exupery;
Tistou of the Green Thumbs by Marcel Druon;
The Animal Family by Randall Jarrell;
Charlotte’s Web by E.B. White.

As in the lists above, which perhaps indicate the four best known works of each cluster, so in the complete sample, there was among male authors a predominance of British writers of the “patriarchal” authors and French writers among the “matriarchal” ones.

Dr. Helson invited my collaboration in her study in order to implement her statistical analyses performed with a more detailed study of content in selected, representative works of each type. I chose, at least as a beginning, the eight books enumerated above. In the cluster they constitute a compromise between representativeness (in terms of cluster scores) and rated excellence. To simplify matters, I chose books written only by men.

After presenting my initial examination of the books and a discussion of our impressions at the Institute for Personality Assessment and Research, University of California, Dr. Helson suggested that I write a paper relating my observations on content to the results of her cluster analysis. Her analysis and my own, different in style and method, would constitute a joint publication in some journal or larger collection of articles.

I started writing, and wrote, and wrote...and wrote, more and more taken by the beauty and wisdom of the books, until I had completed one hundred and fifty pages; then I knew that I had written a book, not a paper.

I thought that I was writing about eight books. I think that I have said much that I have wanted to say about anything and everything. The two type of children’s books soon became to me the reflection of two types of literature—somewhat related to the comical and the tragical, in the classical sense—and these two types of literature express two attitudes towards experience, two ways of life. One of these, characterized by a sense of the all-rightness of existence and man, seemed to echo the philosophies of the Far East; the other, stressing the all-wrongness of our condition, echoes the doctrine of original sin that permeates the perspectives of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Mostly I believe that the two attitudes that lie at the root of “patriarchal” and “matriarchal” books represent two points of view with which each one of us can identify—two contrasting, perhaps seemingly contradictory but truly only complementary, perspectives. I think that we can apprehend reality by means of a synthesis of the two. I started out working on something that could have been called an essay in comparative literature or in the psychology of art. I think that I have finished by doing something like Joseph Campbell has done with mythology: a work of exegesis. However, my very serious exegesis takes as a starting point, not religious scriptures or mythological monuments, but little books of today that grown-ups, in their sense of self-importance, leave to children.

After what I have learned from my writing, I believe that adults are foolish in not taking them more seriously. Unlike the majority of adult fiction, these books speak of matters of life and death.

May their wisdom continue to nourish the young.

NOTE: Throughout the book I will italicize statements in the quotations to which I particularly want to draw the reader’s attention in connection with the ideas discussed.

Claudio Naranjo