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# **The Initiation Archetype in Fiction: A Reading of Hemingway's "Indian Camp" and Yuson's "Voice in the Hills"**

*Jerry R. Yapo*

Many, if not all, of the situations and processes we go through in life are archetypal in nature. The strong, powerful impact of birthing as its initial stage eventually culminates in death as its weakening, consuming phase. In between these is a complex set of realities that all individuals experience while figuring out how life reaches the point of apotheosis. Before we go into an examination of initiation or awakening as the subject of this article, a clarification of concepts is in order.

## **Definition of Concepts**

An archetype (Gk. original pattern) is a basic model, a prototype, a paradigm or exemplar. It is "a term brought into literary criticism from the psychology of Carl Jung, who holds that behind each individual's unconscious—the blocked-off residue of the past—lies the collective unconscious of the human race—the blocked-off memory of our racial past, even of our prehuman experiences" (Holman and Harmon 1992, 35). Such memory impacts on us certain primordial images "shaped by the repeated experience of our ancestors and expressed in myths, religion, dreams, fantasies, and literature" (35). Such recurring images/symbols/themes/ patterns eliciting, more or less, common meanings/reactions/responses from people are called archetypes. Archetypes, therefore, become a recognizable and vital element of one's literary and human experience.

The archetypal critic's job, then, is to discover how works of art or literature shape or construct realities, especially as these reflect primordial images to which readers manifest desired psychological or emotional responses.

## The Initiation Archetype: Phases and Faces

One of the fundamental archetypes of human existence is initiation or awakening. Signifying the passing from darkness and ignorance to enlightenment and maturity, this crucial process requires the individual to undergo a series of excruciating ordeals as he is awakened to life's harsh realities and tragic events.

Before proceeding to a discussion of the phases an initiated individual goes through, let me summarize the selections first.

Both short stories chronicle a young boy's awakening to life's actuality through certain rites of passage, which are requisites of transformation from a life of innocence or naiveté to a state of awareness or certainty. Though situated in different cultural settings, both selections recognize the primacy of awakening as a crucial period by which an individual is drawn gradually from darkness—and all the things associated with it—to enlightenment.

The earliest story in Ernest Hemingway's first volume of short stories, "Indian Camp" documents a teenage boy's initiation to the outside world. The doctor-father brings along with him his loyal son as they embark on a night journey to an Indian reservation camp. Nick/Nickie, with his father consciously stage-managing the way, witnesses an Indian woman give birth and an Indian father commit suicide. After being exposed to these two realities in life, the boy naturally throws a few questions to his father about birth and death, but the latter quickly parries him with his curt answers. Though Nick is unable to substantially resolve certain contradictions in his mind, Father and son go home the following morning with the latter manifesting a greater sense of certainty about himself, feeling "quite sure that he would never die" (41).

"Voice in the Hills" trails the village boy Bingo as he is subjected to a physical initiation to manhood via circumcision in the hands of Ka Romy, a rebel leader. The impressionable kid learns to idolize the rebel leader as the story progresses. Penned by Alfred A. Yuson in early 1987, with the government's ceasefire agreement with the communist guerillas as backdrop, Bingo is torn between his sister Nelfa's two suitors: Capt. Ocampo from the Philippine Army and rebel leader Ka Romy. During the December truce between the soldiers and the rebels, the latter come down to attend a wedding in Barrio Bayabas. Shortly after that, Ka Romy eventually endears himself to Bingo by turning him into a man from the waist down. Having mustered enough cour-

age to bear the unkindest cut of all, so to speak, this would later on serve as his passport in handling the rebel leader's M-16 (and knife), experiencing much thrill in shooting at coconuts. As the pubescent boy continually endears himself to Ka Romy, however, the inevitable happens: the rebel leader is killed with extreme prejudice by Capt. Ocampo (and his men) in an expression of jealousy over Nelfa, the common object of their fancy. Bingo then quickly wrenches off the M-16 from the fallen hero's shoulder and flees to the hills. There is where he thinks he would be able to avenge, sooner or later, Ka Romy's death. This he does with his Mamang's "birdlike cry" symbolically manifesting disapproval of his act in joining the rebel forces (54).

Going back to the series of excruciating ordeals required of initiation, the initiation subject-object—or hero, if we are allowed to call him so—usually goes through three distinct yet interrelated phases: 1) separation, 2) transformation, and 3) return empowerment (Guerin et al. 1992, 154).<sup>1</sup>

While a conscious attempt is made to delineate these phases using the two stories, allow me to also present my insights on the dynamics of the relationship between the two initiation heroes: the initiator and the initiated.

In the separation phase, the initiated subject usually seeks temporary company in solitude wherein he drifts away from the mainstream due to certain contradictions within and outside himself. In Hemingway's selection, separation is more on the psychological level as Nick distances himself from his doctor-father's posturing when he methodically teaches him the complications of childbirth. His seemingly distant or disinterested view of the awakening process, however, does not necessarily preclude his sensitivity to and perceptiveness of the goings-on in the camp.

At the start of "Voice in the Hills," one observes Bingo slouching "by the edge of a haystack surveying the proceedings" (49) as the village folk joyously celebrate a wedding. He is unable to participate in the communal activities of the village, and is even unmindful of how he can possibly help his Mamang and sister Nelfa get out of their endemic poverty. He is in a quandary as to how he can shape up his life given the village's problems, many of which have been engendered by the lack of government presence and the absence of economic opportunities in the area. Such a sorry situation is made complex by the tense and ambivalent atmosphere quite pervasive in the countryside brought about by the barrio folk's experience of being caught in the crossfire between the soldiers and the insurgents.

The dissonant nature of the separation phase logically weaves itself into the transformation stage. The *raison d'être* of the initiation process obviously rests on this crucial stage. It is where the initiation subject needs to undergo certain ordeals or rites of passage to signify his transformation from boyhood to adulthood.

Nick and Bingo are guided in their crucial transformation period by initiators: the doctor-father in "Indian Camp" and the rebel-"father" in "Voice in the Hills." Both initiators apparently manifest sufficient knowledge of the worldview, of which they want their uninitiated intended to be cognizant of. What differentiates them from one another, however, boils down to motives. The doctor-father has clear-cut intentions for his son: he certainly wanted him to be a medic like himself. On the other hand the rebel-"father" seems to be torn between his personal concern presumably for Bingo and his ideological motive in his desire to possibly "recruit" Bingo to join the underground movement.

Fathers are always regarded by their sons as their first real heroes. Besides being viewed as good providers and protectors, they are usually seen as ideal role models and as future co-existents. In "Indian Camp," the doctor-father seems to project the hero image to the max. With the characteristic trademarks of precision and cockiness, he is able to showcase his competence as a doctor to his son. Some readers might even perceive his post-operative exhilaration to mean that he is probably more interested in initiating his son than in attending to the laboring Indian woman. He is so proud of his feat that he ends up exclaiming, "That's one for the medical journal. . . . Doing a Caesarian with a jackknife and sewing it up with nine foot, tapered gut leaders" (40). However, despite such panache, he certainly projects a good father image to his young son, Nick. This is signified by placing his arms around Nick as they make a night trip to the camp. He even orders Uncle George to "Take Nick out of the shanty" (40) after the boy has witnessed the Indian father eventually committing suicide. Such natural bonding between father and son is an apt counterpoint to the "artificial" male bonding between Ka Romy and Bingo in "Voice in the Hills." Artificial in the sense that in the absence of a real father, Bingo ends up being drawn closer to the rebel hero, Ka Romy, who then becomes the surrogate father to the fatherless child. Bingo's role identification then with Ka Romy becomes a necessity by virtue of circumstance. Be that as it may, the rebel hero's persona is several times magnified, as he also becomes a big "brother" and surrogate "teacher"

to Bingo. For instance, it is the rebel hero who decides to perform for him the necessary rite of passage for Filipino boys—circumcision. It is Ka Romy who teaches him how to fire the M-16 and handle the knife. In other words, the otherness of the initiator to the subject becomes multifaceted, for he turns not only as an initiator but also as a surrogate father and teacher, big brother, and folk hero.

The transformation process of awakening or initiation, more often than not, results in an emotional exhilaration. The difference, however, is that in "Indian Camp" it basically leads to a psychological rebirthing, while in "Voice in the Hills" it turns out primarily as a physical experience. In Nick's case, the process of transformation is done methodically. By the time the unexpected comes—the suicide of the Indian father whose wife is being attended to by the doctor—Nick, at last, has conditioned himself for the inevitable violence. On their way back to their place and after him gaining some certainty with life, as symbolized by the change from darkness to light, he naturally turns out to be more curious in pursuing questions about birth and (most specially) death. The doctor-father is quick to respond—or, should I say, enlighten—with his clipped or choppy answers. Such answers motivate the young Nick to see that the actual world "turns out to be exactly what the vignettes suggest it is—a puzzling and disillusioning place in which beauty and wonder, love and compassion, are strangely mixed with cruelty, violence, suffering, loss, alienation, and death. But the vignettes also imply that recognizing the world for what it is forms only one dimension of the human problem: equally vital is the consequent dimension of imposing a human order and meaning on such a world" (Burhans Jr. 1975, 24). Such analysis becomes relevant to Nick's internal processing of the interconnectedness or wholeness of the seemingly irreconcilable tragic events, birth and death, he is exposed to in the outside world.

In "Voice in the Hills," the initiated protagonist, Bingo, is subjected to a crucial physical test of manhood. Though it is quite late for the boy to undergo circumcision—he is already 14—social pressure is exerted on him to proceed with this painful requisite of being a man from the waist down. A lament for lost youth, the shedding of blood is a physical precondition for him to be capable of firing the M-16 and handling the knife, as Ka Romy proselytizes. Besides possessing a newfound sense of maturity and security, the circumcision act means confidence and leverage, especially vis-à-vis his friend Rudy. Sensing the importance of masculinity and power in shaping his personal and

social affairs, Bingo is able to withstand the pain attendant to this culturally prescribed rite of passage. The knife and the gun, on the other hand, are symbols of authority and superiority. Unfortunately though, little did Bingo know that they could also function as instruments of intimidation and hegemony.

The interaction between the initiator and the initiated becomes didactic and interactive (the Q and A portion on death at the end, for instance) in "Indian Camp," while it turns out to be quite linear and unidirectional (note Bingo's passivity while Ka Romy proselytizes on the ideological content of the rebel movement) in "Voice in the Hills." This is perhaps due to the openness and closeness of the father-son relationship in Hemingway's story versus the ambivalent and confusing atmosphere, especially in Bingo's case, in Yuson's selection.

The individual's initiation or awakening culminates in the return/empowerment phase. It is here that the initiation hero realizes his apotheosis. After experiencing the reinforcing effects of the transformation phase and consequently reducing the dissonance caused by the apparent contradictions he has experienced earlier in the separation phase, the initiation hero now manifests a newfound sense of maturity and security, coming to a full circling of his journey to realize his identity. He now envisions himself as an integral component or a full-fledged member of his re-discovered society.

In Hemingway's story, the initiator and the initiated both come to a consummation of their apotheosis. Theirs is an ideal bonding between father and son. Notice, for instance, that when they are seated in the boat on their way home across the lake, Nick is in the stern while the father is rowing. In his return or reintegration to his re-discovered society, Nick would probably be able to row the boat of his life. However, since he is still too young to do that, he senses in his father an ideal role model serving as a mature and responsible helmsman in his life. This is short of prefiguring his father as a perfect co-existent as he enlarges the concentric circles of his lifespace. At this point, however, even without the father's direct protection from the elements, as contrasted to the first part of the story, Nick feels the resurgence of life within him that when "he trailed his hand in the (cold) water, (it) felt warm in the sharp chill of the morning" (41). A classic case of the psyche's power demonstrating its ascendancy over the exigencies of matter.

It is beginning to be daylight, the sun is coming up on the hills as Nick and his father journey back to their place. From darkness to light,

Nick is now approaching the full circling of his initiation to actuality. This is best configured by the fish making a circle in the water, the image alluding to the strong impact of birthing and eventually culminating in death as the circle dissipates. Truly, it is an individual's ability to reconcile apparent contradictions, such as birth and death, that contributes to his whole, unified understanding of the basin of life. Through his own processing of the events that transpire in the village's life, Nick realizes that birth and death "are alike, commingled with violence and suffering; and in between, man lives on the knife-edge of paradox" (Burhans Jr. 1975, 21).

In Yuson's selection, the initiated hero's return takes the form of empowerment, no matter how transitory it may seem. The significance of the initiator's (Ka Romy, the rebel leader) otherness to the initiated (Bingo, the village boy) is somehow devalued due to the killing of the pubescent boy's tragic hero.

Bingo's empowerment translates itself to a tale of vengeance. With the grisly killing of his fallen idol, Bingo finds himself trapped in a helpless circumstance, "in the awful loss of a voice and the tightening space around him" (54). Being so, he is now a lone ranger taking the cudgels of justice for a victim of injustice. The village boy's transformation into a rebel warrior is fired up by both personal and political exigencies. The endearment of the rebel leader to him needs to be emphasized. In taking the cause of Ka Romy, Bingo is just recognizing his indebtedness to a person who was not only instrumental in making him a man but also someone who had metamorphosed as his surrogate father and teacher, big brother, and folk hero. On the political front, a macho/circumcised male is accorded a status quite respected and feared by his peers. Bingo is now taking the first step in possibly having a direct hand in resolving certain problems or contradictions in his village's life. The lives of ordinary folk in Barrio Bayabas have been reduced to a state of obscurity, of oblivion, of insignificance, partly because of heavy military presence in the area. On a personal level, he wanted to exact revenge on the man who not only did wrong to his sister Nelfa but also killed his fallen idol.

As an archetypal quest warrior, Bingo now views himself as a macho man righteous enough to take up arms for a just personal and political cause. By projecting himself as an agent of the underdog, he is consequently according himself a larger role in resolving society's tapestry of problems and contradictions. The initiated hero's empowerment brings him to a realization of his apotheosis.



## Epilogue

The archetypal approach, indeed, is an interesting structuring principle by which a writer constructs and a reader perceives reality.

Although the fundamental situations and processes we experience in life are archetypal in nature, a reader should not unnecessarily force the use of archetypal/mythological criticism when a selection does not lend itself to such an approach. In other words, archetypal criticism becomes truly relevant when reality is imaged in a so-called "universalized" manner, and when the structure and the meaning of the work support it. Meanings associated with certain images or symbols, however, do still vary from one cultural context to another.

The initiation archetype used in structuring "Indian Camp" and "Voice in the Hills" reveals the mindset of phallocentric writers with male protagonists as participants in the awakening process. It would be interesting for other archetype-bound criticisms to consider how female (or male) authors view initiation with females as their characters or subjects.

There is a need for writers, especially Filipinos, to continually define and redefine what it means to be a male, what it means to be a man. Initiation or awakening is certainly not circumscribed solely by circumcision and other similar physical rites of passage.

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