Thinking blondes and heroes: interpreting Jungian theory and hero stories for women’s psychology

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CHAPTER FIVE

Woman to Woman
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Woman to Woman

I saw she was dressed all in grey,  
from a kittenish cashmere skirt and cowl  

down to the graphite signature of her shoes.  
'Sorry I'm late,' she panted, though  
she wasn't, sliding into the chair, her cape

tossed off in a shudder of brushed steel.  
We kissed. Then I leaned back to peruse  
my blighted child, this wary aristocratic mole. . . .

He'd convinced

her to pose nude for his appalling canvases,  
faintly futuristic landscapes strewn  
with carwrecks and bodies being chewed

by rabid cocker spaniels. . . .

She did look ravishing,  
spoOKily insubstantial, a lipstick ghost on tissue. . . .

I've lost her, I thought, and called for the bill.


So far the landscape has been solidly patriarchal - women working for,  
women working against, women working with an androcentric consciousness.  
If it was just woman to woman would it be different? Or is the dominant  
consciousness too overpowering? The Demeter and Persephone myth is as a  
woman to woman story, rare in a patriarchal tradition. Also as a cyclical  
story it presents a different perspective on the paradox of loss and renewal.  
Odd that it should seem to me like a digression, a deviation from the main  
quest ... sad really.
Mothers, Daughters and Friends:

Not only are Demeter and Persephone goddesses, but their rituals are associated with the archaic and obscure Eleusinian Mysteries. This takes the journey toward more ancient mythology, and to the remoter reaches of unconscious processes. The pre-Hellenic myth of Demeter ("Barley-mother" (Graves, 1992, p. 43)) and the Kore (Maiden) comes in many variations, but is presumed to relate to archaic beliefs and rites associated with the changing seasons and agricultural fertility. Since this is a psychological study, not an anthropological one, I make passing reference only to a few of these variations. Comparative and historical mythologies abound; Mircea Eliade (1963), Erich Neumann (1970), Joseph Campbell (1991a, 1991b) and Robert Graves (1992) are just a few of the authors who have attempted to trace the histories of the Demeter and Kore stories. Among the women writers who have reinterpreted this quintessentially women's story from a women's perspective, are Christine Downing (1981), Patricia Berry (1987) and Polly Young-Eisendrath and Florence Wiedemann (1987). My interest too, is to discuss those elements of the myth which may have relevance to women's psychology and especially to woman to woman relationships.

The familiar but compelling image in the Leonardo da Vinci painting, reproduced at the front of this chapter, is a classic portrait of the child hero. A predictable, patifocal interpretation of the tableau would describe Mary (already sanctified by her privileged role as mother of God), cherishing her hero-to-be, who in turn plays with a lamb, the symbol of his future martyrdom. The grandmother, Saint Anne, looks on lovingly. Jung (CW 9i, § 93ff) commenting on Freud's discussion of the "dual mother" (in relation to the da Vinci painting and Leonardo's own childhood - with two mothers) pointed to the obvious fact that St Anne is grandmother. Yet the discussion retains the
perspective of the child, either Jesus or Leonardo. To connect the Leonardo image to the Demeter and Persephone story however, requires only a slight shift in the focus on the relationships. The image can be read as a representation of an intimate mother and daughter relationship; close companions and friends in rapt communion of new life. Mary stretches easily for the child, as she balances precariously but confidently on her mother’s lap. The two women are very secure in their intimacy. For the continuity of the discussion, it seemed entirely appropriate to choose, as chapter illustration, an image which seems so quintessentially of the Western patriarchal tradition, but which harks back to pre-Classical compositions. As comparison, an example of a similar trio from the early Greek tradition is reproduced at the end of the chapter. Leonardo’s The Virgin and Child with St Anne offers a counterpoint to the exploration of woman to woman relationships, providing as it does, several layers of possible meanings, and being the only illustration of a male artist’s work chosen as chapter introduction.

In the Demeter and Persephone story the valiant young hero is definitely subsidiary. The journey and quest are Demeter’s as she searches, lonely and desperate, for her missing daughter Kore/Persephone, while the descent into the Underworld is Persephone’s share of the heroic saga. Particularly in this story of complex inter-relationships, the elements of journey, quest, descent appear as elements of a broader, integrated, cyclical myth where the protagonists are clearly differentiated yet interchangeable in their roles as mother and daughter. It is only much later in history that the focus moves to the adorable baby boy of exceptional origins and remarkable future. An exploration of the earlier losses, quests and realisations of mother and daughter is the concern of this chapter.

An overview of the myth will provide context for the following discussion. Demeter, the mother, is an aspect of the “Great Mother” (Neumann, 1970), the
archetypal "Mother"; she is a nature and fertility goddess (the negative aspects of the image will be discussed below). Demeter was, specifically, the mother or goddess of the fruits of nature, often called the Corn Goddess, (her Roman name, Ceres, has the same root meaning as cereal) and as such is not to be confused with Gaia, Mother Earth. Demeter's constant companion was her daughter, Kore, subsequently known as Persephone ("she who brings destruction", Graves, 1992, p. 93), an embodiment of the feminine as young woman, virgin and maiden. Kerenyi described the relationship as:

One of the forms [of Persephone] (daughter with mother) appears as life; the other (young girl with husband) as death. Mother and daughter form a living unity in a border-line situation - a natural unit which, equally naturally, carries within it the seeds of its own destruction.

(Kerenyi, 1963, p. 107).

While out at play (some versions say with Aphrodite and Athene), Kore was drawn by the exquisite perfume of beautiful flowers (perhaps hyacinths, perhaps narcissus). As Kore stopped to gather the flowers the earth gaped open and she, and a herd of swine, fell into the Underworld to be captured by Hades. Alternative versions state that Hades, king of the Underworld emerged from the chasm, in his war chariot, to abduct Kore. It is important to note here that Gaia, Mother Earth, gave assistance (the flowers and the chasm) not to Kore, but to Hades. Following the abduction, a rape and forced marriage ensued, and Kore became Persephone, Queen of the Underworld. Demeter was devastated at the disappearance of her beloved daughter, and wandered about disconsolately, seeking any information she could about her lost child.

Eventually Demeter, and her companion the moon goddess Hecate, the only one to hear Kore's cries, were told by the sun, who witnessed the abduction, where Persephone was to be found. The mother's joy was
short-lived however; she discovered that, while with Hades, Persephone had eaten a seed of the pomegranate, a symbol of female fertility, but also a food of the dead (Graves, 1992). The marriage had been consummated and Persephone was no longer the carefree maiden, but was now a woman in her own right, and queen of her own realm, the Underworld - Hades, or Tartarus. Demeter’s renewed grief was now so extreme that she rendered the earth barren. All the crops failed. In time, the cause of the suffering mortals was taken up by the other gods, and eventually a compromise was negotiated. Persephone would return to her mother, except for three months of each year, which she would spend in the Underworld.

At a fundamental level this is an allegory of the changing seasons and the sowing and harvesting of crops, in particular, of the older division into the three seasons, winter (inactivity), spring (growth) and summer (harvest), represented in the three forms of the goddess, Hecate, Persephone and Demeter. Persephone, the young, virgin seed, must be buried in the earth, in order to grow and ripen. She then grows into the likeness of, becomes interchangeable with, her mother Demeter, and is cut down, harvested, returned to her Underworld companions Hades and Hecate; so, the cycle begins again. However the psychological interpretations are my primary concern here, and Demeter’s story has much to reveal in that context.

Of the various incidents which occur during Demeter’s search for her lost daughter, two involve significant stories of Demeter as a nursemaid and Demeter as the victim of a rape. In her wanderings Demeter, disguised as an old woman, found herself in the country of Eleusis where the king and queen gave her shelter and employed her as nurse to their son. To show her gratitude, Demeter decided to make the young prince immortal. To this end, every night she placed the child in a fire, until eventually discovered by the terrified queen,
who snatched her son to safety (or alternatively, she watched her son perish, the spell broken, Graves, 1992). The queen banished Demeter, unaware of Demeter's divine status and the generous intention behind her perverse action. This is one of many versions of such a story; an almost identical version is part of the myth of the Egyptian goddess Isis. Its particular interest lies in the fact that, in this case a work against nature, desirable as it may seem, does not succeed. Yet the goddess Demeter held no grudge, rather her special fondness for Eleusis and its people rendered it especially sacred to her. It was to Triptolemus, another son of the Eleusinian royal couple, that Demeter taught the skills of agriculture.

The rape of Demeter by Poseidon, an event parallel to that which was happening to the daughter at the same time in the Underworld, seems gratuitously cruel. Yet in a typically paradoxical outcome, it is Demeter (the mother rather than the daughter) who gives birth to the adored offspring, the divine child Plutos, “plenty” (also known as Brimus and as Iacchus, Graves, 1992, p. 94). Although the young wife Persephone apparently bore no children to Hades, Demeter and Persephone have become so closely allied as to eventually be the one woman, “...she is non-differentiated mother and daughter. The child is likewise undifferentiated - it is only what is born, the fruit of birth.” (Kerenyi, 1963 p. 144).

**Woman to Woman Mysteries:**

The strangeness and mystery of the Demeter and Persephone story, its paradoxical aspects, are essential to its power as myth. It is unusual in that it captures the principle aspects of the feminine experienced as first person or agent, rather than as “other”, and relates them to the feminine cyclical aspects of life and nature. A myth which addresses directly the relationships of women to one another, and in which there is not a primary male hero, is relatively rare.
in the patriarchal tradition. This gives it special relevance to women who are attempting to reassess what it means to be female, something which involves a reassessment as well of what it means to relate to other people. The juxtaposition of differences between mother and maiden, sometimes clear in their opposition, but often intertwined and blurred, provides a symbolic representation, the “unopened...bud” in Kerenyi’s (1963, p. 105) poetic interpretation, of personal experience of the feminine merging with a shared communal experience, which of its very nature epitomises the traditional feminine. It is this shared experience, an impersonal, collective quality which also traditionally connects the feminine with the unconscious, the life principle and nature. Kerenyi said:

To enter into the figure of Demeter means to be pursued, to be robbed, raped, to fail to understand, to rage and grieve, but then to get everything back and be born again. And what does all this mean, save to realise the universal principle of life, the fate of everything mortal?

(Kerenyi, 1963, p. 123).

The feminine, cyclical aspects of life and nature remain inaccessible, a mystery to a modern individual consciousness. The themes do not follow the familiar linear sequence of traditional Western story forms. They are amenable neither to logical exposition nor to emotional resolution in a final happy ending. Cyclical myths and stories succeed, not in a telling which provides neat solutions and final causes, but rather in their attempts to give adequate weight to the intellectual confusion and emotional turmoil so often ensuing from the tragedies and joys of being alive. Demeter, in her rounds of loss and restoration, in her direct association with the fertility of nature, can represent the impersonal natural cycle opposed and contrasted with the individual (Persephone as wife and queen) seeking specific personal goals. The challenge
for the individualist is to reconcile Persephone's dark fate with the liberating, autonomous ideals of differentiation.

Paradoxically (and so predictably, in a myth) it is Demeter the earthly, material and worldly aspect of the feminine, which also represents the collective, impersonal feminine. It is Persephone, the individuating principle, the changing aspect, which is forced to descend into the Underworld (the unconscious feminine, the "other") in order to fulfil her own destiny. Yet ultimately the two are one, Demeter and Persephone the opposing but complete aspects of the archetypal feminine (Downing, 1981). The way they are able to maintain their immortal existence and timeless relationship is through the continual and irresistible cycles of separation, death and renewal.

Just as the Eleusinian Mysteries were female rites (even in later times when men participated they dressed as women), it seems from the evidence available, that the final denouement, the ultimate purpose of the rites, was a realisation very much in the traditional feminine mode (Kerényi, 1963). The mysteries culminated quite simply with the display of an ear of grain. Such a basic and commonplace object seems hardly worthy of such reverence. It seems something of an anticlimax after the demands and frenzy of days of fasting and rituals (which included a particularly brutal sacrifice of suckling pigs, Campbell, 1991a). So presumably it would take considerable dedication and devotion for the initiates to reach a psychological state making it possible for them to really understand the significance of their sacred object. It would demand a synthesis of meanings, an ability to integrate the real and symbolic experience into a satisfying personal realisation.

Kerényi (1963) pointed out that they were essentially wordless mysteries; Logos, logical and rational explanation, would have been absent, and in any case would have been inadequate to express the paradoxical meanings in the
situation. It seems to me in consequence, that the records of the Eleusinian Mysteries are sketchy not only because the original reports were deliberately censored by the initiates who chose not to break their pledge of secrecy, but also because what they had discovered was not really open to verbal descriptions and analyses. The mysteries have remained secret at least partly because they cannot be explained. This is a veneration of the feminine not only in the content of the rites, but also in the style of performance and participation. Although a direct return to these ancient rites would be an aberration in modern times, much of what they symbolised warrants careful consideration, in particular, a capacity for an integrative understanding beyond the constraints of rationality.

It is significant that such a religious experience can seem foreign and excessive to twentieth century consciousness. True, a similar experience is still possible for devoutly religious people. The elevation of the sacred host (made of grain and water) at the Catholic mass bears more than a passing resemblance to the displaying of an ear of grain (Campbell, 1991a). It is not simply a re-enactment of the Last Supper; the priest re-creates the event and the host becomes the body of Christ. For most moderns however, there is scepticism and maybe even embarrassment in accepting such ecstatic rituals. From a rational perspective, the loss of personal control, merging with the experience and especially the abandonment of rational thought are viewed with suspicion and disdain. The loss of personal control may be acceptable at play, as relaxation, in sexual activity, in some meaningless expression of excess energy, but to claim revelation from such behaviour is thought to verge on the pathological.

Other feminine qualities, along with integrative, intuitive forms of understanding traditionally associated with the feminine, are to be found in the
cyclical death and rebirth motif. Eliade (1963) made a distinction between this
cyclical form of renewal, one associated with archaic and predominantly
feminine rites, and the later patriarchal form which tends towards a single
renewal (or if cyclical, the cycles are extremely long). In the patriarchal form
there is a belief in an early state of perfection or paradise - as in Plato's Ideal
Forms, Heaven before Lucifer's rebellion, or the Garden of Eden. An eventual
return to this state of paradise is to be the final outcome. It is usually expected
however, that the new order will be preceded by some apocalyptic event which
will totally destroy the less-than-adequate existing world. The "Revelations" of
St. John are the most celebrated Christian account of such a scenario. The
pattern is replicated in the hero's quest, the goals of psychological development
and traditional narratives all rely on a linear, teleological rationale. (The
implications of a teleological orientation to theories of self are addressed in the
next chapter.)

For many twentieth century Westerners, for whom the religious account no
longer provides solace, there is no paradisiacal beginning, only chaos preceding
the Big Bang, and no hope of a happy ending after the holocaust which seems
inevitable. Yet no doubt for some, the possibilities of scientific control of
natural forces promise a new Eden, at least for a chosen few. Either way
however, the possible explanations are very much within the linear mode of a
patrifocal tradition. Although the older, cyclical world view does not change
the current plight of humanity, it might offer some useful reassessments. The
linear preoccupation with scientifically verifiable first causes and predictable
final outcomes limits options and possibilities. Admittedly there is an
inevitability about the cyclical view as well, but the possibility of future
repetitions of the cycle, perhaps with variations on a theme (spirals, in effect),
reduces somewhat the sense of driven urgency.
It is not so much that a return to the older ways of mother worship is recommended, or even possible, but rather that it seems necessary to recognise the degree of shift in cultural understanding to a patrifocal bias. Campbell (1991b) pointed out the extent to which the early female rites offend more modern sensibilities with their extreme and impersonal brutalities. Alternatively, Neumann (1970) suggested that the matrifocal perspectives were deliberately and systematically denigrated and vilified by the newly triumphant patriarchies. Perhaps both assessments are true in part. However the situation exists presently where it is extremely difficult to reconcile the older psychological orientation (towards a collective appreciation) with a modern psychology (which subscribes to the ideal of an individually conscious and autonomous person). The solution so far has been to follow, single-mindedly, the ideal of the autonomous individual in the restrictive guise of the Man of Reason. That has required the dismissal and denigration of the other parts of the paradox, the parts celebrated in the ancient rites of the unknown and the feminine, and especially with intuitive and non-verbal forms of communication and knowledge.

If Jung (CW 8) was right, and the tendency for human development is towards increased consciousness, there is a real sense in which the androcentrism (i.e. consciousness itself) must bend back on itself and, for the sake of completing the process, acknowledge the unknown aspects of the unconscious, traditionally linked to the feminine. This implies neither a return to unconscious collectivity (matriarchy) nor a subscription to exclusively rational consciousness (patriarchy), but some form of conscious individuality which is able to incorporate acceptance and appreciation of other individuals and of other non-rational, ways of knowing.
Demeter and Persephone Now:

An interesting aspect of the Demeter and Persephone myth for women, is that it is a surviving remnant of a matriarchal culture. It stems from the tradition of mother worship, from the southern areas of the ancient Greek world - Minoan and Anatolian cultures - later to be dominated by the patriarchal religions of the Indo-European north.

The Homeric patriarchal Olympus reflected and was the outcome of a 'heroic' state of society, that is it emphasized rather the individual than the group, it resulted from warlike and migratory conditions. On the other hand the worship of the Mother emphasizes the group, the race and its continuance rather than the prowess of the individual, it focuses on the facts of fertility and the fostering of life.

(Harrison, 1963, p. 63).

Here, Jane Ellen Harrison summarised the reasons for the interest later aroused in many feminists for the older, matriarchal religious perspectives and values. A recurring theme in feminist critiques of modern society is the precedence given to individual over group or collective interests. A renewed sense of relatedness, of community, provides the hope for future change for many feminists (Benjamin, 1988; Dunne, 1989; Gilligan, 1982; Lauter & Rupprecht, 1985).

For me, as a woman, and a cautious advocate of the Jungian goal of individuation, individuality and collectivity are not antithetical; humans are manifestly social individuals. Jung discussed the myth in terms of the individuation process for women (as well as in terms of anima), in The Psychological Aspects of the Kore (CW 9i, § 306ff, originally published together with Kerenyi’s, 1963, essay Kore). However, Jung seemed to find the story unsettling in its exclusively female focus, so discussed it essentially as the
resolution of a mother/daughter complex. He acknowledged, but did not
develop, the wider implications, claiming: "... the Demeter-Kore myth is far too
feminine to have been merely the result of an anima-projection. ... [It] is alien
to man and shuts him out." (CW 9i, § 383). Interestingly, Kerenyi (1963)
seemed to find greater possibilities in the alternating differentiation and
merging of the goddesses.

The relationship Demeter enjoyed with Persephone - the combination of
her own feminine maturity with the freshness and purity of her maiden child -
was so complete and precious that its loss drove Demeter to a devastating
retribution on the world. Persephone, as focus of Demeter's love, and the goal
of her search, as well as the object of Hades' covetousness, provides a
perspective on being the object of desire; simultaneously cherished and
restricted. The abduction and rape of Persephone seemed to have caused more
pain to the mother than to the daughter. The extent and duration of Demeter's
grief led Berry (1987) to label it narcissistic. Yet I can easily identify with
Demeter's undifferentiated, overwhelming grief. The barbarous intrusion into
their lives was unexpected to both, but, while Persephone's terror would have
been undeniably real, located in actual events, Demeter's was loss, lack, not
knowing. There was nothing against which to rage, no-one with information,
no-one to blame, only Hecate to help. Persephone's descent was a spectacular
dislocation, but Demeter's isolation was psychological, it meant being shut out
of life though still in the ordinary world.

Interestingly, when she chose to shun Olympus and her fellow immortals
for their lack of assistance, instead of retreating to the seclusion of her own
realm, she wandered into the cities of humans and she busied herself with
ordinary, daily practicalities (Downing, 1981). While her all-pervasive rage
continued to seethe, she preoccupied herself with the same domestic and
agricultural concerns which constituted her life at home. These wonderfully complex characterizations indicate no easy resolution into a smooth, singular transcendence; they require living with paradox, a continual juggling of contradictions. And that only refers to Demeter. Then there is Persephone.

Persephone had accepted her new role as a mature woman independent of her mother. Persephone, indeed, seemed perfectly at ease in her silent, regal and commanding incarnation as Queen of the Underworld, calmly greeting all newcomers to her twilight realm. It seems that it is only through the process of differentiation between mother and daughter that the cycle can go on. Persephone must be lost to her mother, become wife and queen in her own right, before she can once again return and merge with her mother, this time merge in a more complex sense, as she becomes the mature woman personified in Demeter. Persephone comes to know what it is to be her mother only by independently living through her own experiences.

It is once Persephone has discovered possibilities in life (and death) away from her mother’s influence, and established herself as queen of her designated realm - she has extricated herself from the excessive demands of both mother and kidnapper/husband - she becomes a commanding, powerful goddess, with specific rights and responsibilities of her own. She doesn’t sever the relationships; she continues to spend time with both mother and husband, but she has established the space, literal and psychological, in which to interact as herself, Persephone. Is it too fanciful to suggest that, consequently, Demeter would ultimately be enriched as well? Perhaps this is why the boy, conceived in such distress, could become “Plenty”.

The process involves changes, losses as well. Persephone has become a different person, or more accurately, a different aspect of her total self. She has new rights and responsibilities, quite considerable ones as queen of the
Underworld: the fresh carefree innocence of her girlhood, which so nicely complemented the positive aspects of her mother, goddess of fruitfulness, has had to be sacrificed. Now the two women are not so much complementary, as a single, complex person. The innocence and joie de vivre, formerly Persephone’s qualities, must now be located in another - in the divine child, Plutos, or in the young man, Triptolemus, chosen to be favourite. Interestingly, it is with the coming of the chosen male (either child or favourite) - with the arrival of the masculine as “other” - that the delight and joy in the relationship changes from an insular, exclusive one to an inclusive one. The child is Plutos, “plenty”, the bringer of fruitfulness to the natural world, and the young man, Triptolemus, is the disciple to whom will be taught the skills of agriculture.

Another famous Da Vinci drawing depicts the same tableau, Mary St Anne and Jesus, but with an infant John the Baptist included (Gould, 1975).

To restate in more general social terms the powerful patterns suggested in the myth, it is a rare story about the special nature of female development and relationships, and as such can be related directly to the process of individuation for a woman. From a state of original unconsciousness or paradisiacal innocence, a state of blissful, unreflective experiencing, the girl Persephone is forced into a confrontation with the dark side of life and death; with the Underworld, the other face of the unconscious.

In most myths the descent into the Underworld is made to find and bring back a lost love, as with Orpheus and Euridice, Ishtar and Tammuz, or alternatively the magical treasure as with Psyche. In this case though, Persephone stays to become the bride of Hades, and queen of this lifeless place. In this respect the story diverges from the typical form of the hero’s journey. But then the unconscious and death have long been associated with the feminine. Persephone has found her place. It is significant that, while Hades
remains shadowy and undifferentiated (he is both the place and the person of Hades), the "invisible one" (Berry, 1987, p. 15), it is Persephone who holds court with gravity and dignity, if not with alacrity. Ultimately she also has for company the other member of the trinity, her shadow self, Hecate. As Downing (1981) pointed out, even when Persephone returns to Demeter, there is no intimation that she has left Hades, she is always present to welcome the dead. So why should Demeter, the third member of the trinity and another aspect of the feminine, be so devastated? In Jungian terms, precisely because this individuation has led to a total separation. Demeter has lost a part of herself. Until that part, the unconscious feminine, is located, Demeter's usually bright and productive world is indeed barren. Once Persephone is found, and the two are reunited, there is no return to the previous state of communal bliss, but it is replaced with a more expansive and accommodating compromise. Demeter has access to Persephone. The woman of the material world has access to the unconscious, otherworldly aspects of herself (at least sometimes).

**Destructive Demeter:**

Even though it is impossible to predict either personal or collective outcomes of psychological development, it is possible to detect ways in which the current lack of recognition accorded the mythical, integrative way of knowing contributes to difficulties in understanding both life events and interpersonal relationships. Aspects of the death and renewal theme in the Demeter and Persephone story are very pertinent here. There are several ways in which an unrecognised and deprecated archetype (Mother archetype, in this example) can be detected at work. Although apparently absent, its presence can be felt in a negative sense. In an attempt to be free of the bonds of childhood, the hero tends to invoke the negative mother. With manly nobility Oedipus leaves his parents to forestall a prophecy, then believes he has
defeated the 'Terrible Mother' in the form of the Sphinx, only to find himself entangled in an appalling, incestuous relationship with Jocasta. The positive aspects of the archetype can be so reduced as to offer no balance for an excess of the destructive opposite. In the case of Demeter, the positive mothering is attacked and brutalised until it spills over into a grieving mother's excessive vengeance. In Medea's case her perception of her own mothering was that she had produced such evil that she was driven to infanticide.

Such a tormented story unfolds, also, in the Greek tragedy *Hecuba* by Euripides (trans. 1967). Hecuba, Queen of Troy, had seen her family and her city reduced to ruins and was herself enslaved by the victorious Greeks. Tragedy is heaped on tragedy as she first witnesses the sacrifice of her young daughter to the ghost of Achilles, then discovers the body of her youngest son, murdered by the king of Thrace, the treacherous ally to whom the child had been sent to ensure his safety. Finally Hecuba's grief overflows into an orgy of revenge. She murders the young sons of the king of Thrace, while her women companions attack and blind the king himself. Such cumulative horrors are excessive, yet there are many real life stories of demanding, possessive mothers who extort a great psychological payment from those who interfere with their tightly knit family group. There are mothers who manage to control their children throughout life, to the detriment of all other relationships. And there are mothers, like Demeter, whose children have been taken from them, and for whom the grief and rage are so excessive as to blind them to the harm their vengeance might inflict on other mother's children.

There are many successful and satisfying mother/daughter and mother/son relationships, and there are many women who can extend their maternal capacities to a more collective, "social" family. I do not mean to denigrate such relationships. It is rather when the relationships become so exclusive and
the bond so strong that the women are at risk of losing their personal identity and aspirations to a collective demand which seems to have a life and being of its own, quite independent of the requirements of the individuals involved. For its own survival, this form of mother love must possess totally, even if it also smothers and stifles. Demeter must have Persephone restored to her exclusively or she will make the world a barren place. It requires divine intervention to persuade Demeter that her daughter can also pursue an independent life as wife and queen of her own realm, for at least one third of the year. Such a struggle is currently reflected in the relationships between the older and younger generations of feminists. Some of the older feminists have been puzzled and even hurt when younger women have failed to carry on the struggle in accordance with established patterns. Meanwhile the younger women find they often have to battle their older sisters and mothers, as well as their anti-feminist opponents, in order to set their own agenda and make their own choices, sometimes just in order to be heard (Summers, 1994).

The Demeter and Persephone relationship in its negative aspects excludes the male from equal partnership - his only place in this idyll is either as a source of fertilisation, or as the offspring, the divine child. Hades is portrayed as a violent intruder and Poseidon takes a cowardly advantage of Demeter during her distracted wanderings. In the myth the shock of the rape is transformed to the joy of the birth of the child, Plutos, and the abduction of Kore is redeemed in the rebirth of Persephone, as the maiden aspect of Demeter herself. Personal human relationships are somewhat less prone to the production of divine offspring as a satisfying resolution, so the exclusivity and extreme demands of such an archetypal possession almost certainly will place great stress on the human psyche.
For Neumann (1986) Demeter is an image of the overwhelming, possessive "Terrible Mother", who holds back the masculine realisation of the Self, normally achieved via the father archetype. Similarly she inhibits the individuation process for females - Gaia, Neumann said, is representative of the Self for women. The "Terrible Mother" Neumann saw as anima possession of the worst kind. Neumann's (1970, 1986) assessment that the West has an ambivalent and difficult relationship to the mother archetype is plausible, reflecting the progression from matriarchal to patriarchal social arrangements.

My response though is similar to that of the psychoanalytic feminists to Freud - I concede that he is describing accurately the way things are, but I strongly disagree that this is the appropriate and inevitable progression. That people should model other social arrangements on family relationships seems entirely predictable, but a Western predilection for rigid hierarchies has constrained the pattern severely, by focusing on Mother, Father, Child - in that order (but paradoxically, almost always from the child's point of view). In reality family relationships are far more complex; one is child, sibling, parent, cousin, aunt or uncle ... grandchild, grandparent ... godparent, foster parent ... the list could go on. Most importantly though, people play several of these roles at any one time. To be understood only in the guise of child (or parent) is to have to operate with one's hands tied behind one's back.

It is worth reiterating that this is by no means meant to be a condemnation of mother-daughter relationships, or of any other relationships between women. To ignore Demeter is to court disaster. Rather I want to stress the opposite, the need for successful relationships between women, as between human beings in general. Women in particular have suffered from a diminishment in quality of relationships especially since the industrial revolution. Isolated in nuclear family groups, they have inherited a tradition of a secluded and lonely life,
spent mostly in the company of their young children. If she has a successful career outside the home, the mother might have a share of adult company, but the separation of public and private life can still leave the mothering shut away in a lonely, isolated compartment. It may well be impossible to return to past practices in order to recapture the richness of extended family and community groups. But it is little wonder that the women's movement concerns itself to such an extent with searching out ways to alleviate the plight of isolated mothers of young children. Perhaps this is the positive face of the archetype of the Demeter and Persephone story; a concern with the restoration of satisfaction and fruitfulness to an increasingly barren psychological relationship between mother and child, and between woman and woman.

The feminine can recede so far into the unconscious that its absence is evidenced only in the inflation of the masculine perspective. The feminine, both as mother and maiden, is trivialised and sentimentalised, leaving the "real" business of living, the development of an ideal world, to be pursued with a determined rationalism. As accepted mode, the rational can be equally seductive to women, and especially to feminists. Strangely, this exclusively rational determination can be either optimistic or pessimistic. But at the present time, for a great many of those who dare to speculate about the rosy ideal of a future paradise, the prospect does seem rather gloomy.

Maybe Demeter and Persephone too have very little to offer this view of future outcomes. It seems more likely that what they do have to offer is in terms of a reassessment, a revaluing of potentialities in nature and in human nature which have been controlled and subdued, often brutally, in a futile attempt to change the relentless cycles of life and nature so difficult for the Westernised human psyche to accept. Despite the fact that they are divine, Demeter and Persephone are very much of the world, so they are a reminder
that divinity, as a transcendent ideal, is an essentially androcentric interpretation. If people are to live successfully with the tension created by their dreams of youth and immortality battling against their inevitable mortality and vulnerability to old age, they will have a need for an appreciation of the paradoxes and mysteries encapsulated in myths such as that of Demeter and Persephone, myths which attempt to give meanings, rationales, to the confusing aspects of human existence.

**Modern Re-tellings:**

At first glance, any connections between the movie, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* (Avnet, Flagg & Sobieski, 1991), and the Demeter and Persephone myth seemed tenuous at best. Most conspicuously, there are no significant mother/daughter relationships portrayed in the film. But once I had shifted focus to relationships between women, the similarities became obvious. That this should occur with a popular, mainstream movie reflecting a particularly archaic myth, added to my delight. In parenthesis, whether the connections between the two stories are deliberate or accidental - conscious or unconscious - is ultimately immaterial, either way the mythic themes endure. The movie opens with an old truck being hauled from muddy water - echoes of a chariot emerging from the Underworld are irresistible. The story, presented as a series of flashbacks, revolves around two sets of woman to woman relationships. The story-teller, Mrs. Ninny Threadgoode, a bored and lonely eighty-two year old living in a nursing home, befriends a younger woman visitor, Evelyn Couch. Ninny tells the story of the other relationship, between the wild and irrepressible Idgy Threadgoode and the gentle Ruth Bennett, who together ran the cafe in the tiny rural town of Whistle Stop, in the American South during the great depression.
Idgy, after the accidental death of her devoted brother, Buddy (also Ruth’s sweetheart), transforms from tomboy to feral recluse. Even her occasional contacts with Ruth cease when Ruth finally agrees to marry the persistent Frank Bennett (owner of the truck). Idgy’s isolated, subsistence lifestyle bears little resemblance to the rural idyll enjoyed by Demeter and Persephone. Yet it shares the reclusive aspects, and mirrors the self-sufficiency, even to Idgy’s particular talent as a bee-charmer. She confidently gathers wild honey to sell for her liquor money; her roisterous drinking sessions with the local lads constitute her only social life. When Idgy eventually visits her lost soul-mate, Ruth, she finds her in a stark house set in a bleak and barren landscape. Ruth is lonely, physically abused and withdrawn. Idgy is asked to leave. Eventually, after the abuse continues, the now pregnant Ruth is rescued by Idgy and friends. The two women set themselves up as proprietors of the local cafe, specialising in fried green tomatoes and barbecued pork. The order of events might be altered, but the exclusivity and intensity of the relationship (including the baby son, Buddy Jnr.) mirrors closely that of Demeter and Persephone.

That there are strong intimations of a sexual relationship between the women (handled subtly, or coyly, depending on one’s orientation) further highlights the strength of the attachment.

Inevitably the happiness is shattered by the return of Frank Bennett, who is killed accidentally, when disturbed attempting to kidnap his son. Life assumes its routines, but with less freedom - there is now the ubiquitous police presence, investigating Frank’s disappearance. In an otherwise entirely normal, plausible, if at times clichéd and melodramatic story of family life, the events of the ‘hog boiling’ and barbecuing of pork (a particular favourite of the visiting lawman) provide a magnificent touch of black humour. The ever resourceful Idgy, faced with the dilemma of concealing Bennett’s body, with
the help of her kitchenman transforms the body into “barbecued pork”, to be served in the cafe. That the sacrifice of pigs, in the Eleusinian Mysteries, was said to have replaced an even earlier ritual of human sacrifice (Campbell, 1991a), makes Idgy’s inventive solution all the more delicious (pun intended).

The other important relationship in the movie is that which develops between Ninny and Evelyn. It is a friendship, both confirming and exciting, which provides the impetus needed to transform Evelyn from repressed hausfrau to liberated women. She makes the changes in quintessentially ‘80’s style, working her way through a progression of self-development classes, with often hilarious consequences. Finally, self-assured and determined, she first asks, then later informs her husband, that Ninny will be coming to live with them. The friendship between Ninny and Evelyn highlights the cyclical patterns of alternating isolation and closeness. This is reinforced, in the final scenes, where it is confirmed for Evelyn (and the audience) that Ninny and Idgy are one and the same.

Another small town, this time in rural Australia, is the setting for a less melodramatic, homely interpretation of the cyclical theme, this time with a Hecate character featuring, in the short story, Goddess of the Crossroads (Harwood, 1995). In this story, the sacred mysteries are the everyday secrets and puzzling pronouncements uttered above the heads of the children. The narrator, as a young girl, journeyed no farther than the daily walk with the teen-aged home-help and the baby brother. They obediently avoided visits to other people’s houses or to the creek, until invited in for a cold drink by, of all people, ‘The Gypsy’, feared as a witch by the children. The taboos are further transgressed when the gypsy talks of having read the mother’s hand, then does both a palm reading and a card reading for the little girl. Fired with daring by successfully surviving the first disobedience, the girl later goes to the creek,
slips down the bank and has to be rescued - by The Gypsy. In triumph, that same evening, she offers to do a card reading for her father, to the astonishment and disapproval of her grandmother. The narrator continues:

But my mother said, “Leave her alone; she’s only playing.”

_I read my mother’s hand._

Mother, you are like an old gypsy yourself now with your snowy hair and tanned skin; the promise of long life was true, and I have had my four children, and will have my long life. I alone can remember you as you stood by my bed, young and beautiful, chasing away my nightmares with lamplight. “There is nothing to be afraid of.” Now it is I who must comfort you against the dark.


**In Summary; Re-closing the Circle:**

The myth of Demeter and Persephone was chosen to provide an illustration of some of the complexities in relationships between women. In most psychological theories, if such relationships are addressed at all, they are treated as secondary. Typically, as Downing (1988) pointed out, only the problems associated with a daughter’s resolution of the mother complex are considered worthy of extended discussion in psychodynamic theories. Given the importance of woman to woman relationships in family, friendship and professional interactions, an exploration of relevant thematic material offers some intriguing and sometimes provocative perspectives. Most conspicuously, one assumption of individualism - that close woman to woman relationships, especially mother and daughter relationships, are inherently immature - deserves to be dismissed as the destructive self-fulfilling prophecy it is.

Demeter and Persephone have complicated interactions, which raise questions about exclusive, possessive, dependent but devoted relationships;
questions about finding a balance between differentiation and closeness, and about alliances and antagonisms. The issues are brought to life in the startling events and the extreme outcomes of the Demeter story. The excesses serve to highlight the paradoxes. Another, perhaps even more important aspect of this particular myth which demonstrates paradox, is the atypically cyclical nature of the story. Where traditional Western narratives have a linear form - clearly defined beginning, middle and end - the Demeter and Persephone myth, like the seasonal cycles with which it is associated, continually repeats the themes of a carefree childhood, separation and loss, reunion and rebirth. In a modern culture with an exclusive focus on the individual lifespan from birth to death, this archaic myth is a reminder that there are other ways of unravelling the mystery of existence.

"Look Mum, no hands!"

Oddly, this turns out to be Demeter's story, a mother's own story. Of course it is Persephone's as well, since they are both one, but still told from Demeter's perspective. Is that because I can only think in linear progressions? I should be able to start anywhere in the story - surely, that is what cycles are about.

Demeter's story can begin, arbitrarily, in springtime. She and Persephone were happy and self-contained; Demeter was satisfied, settled, content, and Persephone was full of life, having fun. Then the intrusion - Persephone was gone, betrayed, it seems by Gaia herself. Persephone must have been shocked, confused, terrified, but somehow she not only regained her composure, but also accepted her new position. Demeter remained inconsolable, wandering aimlessly about, with only Hecate to help.
Why does not Gaia tell? Was Zeus really such an old bully? Why this lack of solidarity? Demeter, of the light and of the material world, has the aid of the lunar Hecate, but not of Gaia, the generous earth, with whom she had such a productive association. Has this something to do with the pall of a perpetual springtime? Had they all been bewitched by adolescence, a bit like the West is now? Unless the cycle progresses everyone must eventually face starvation, stultification.

Perhaps Gaia recognised the problem then, and allowed the shady Hades to abduct the lovely young thing? In fact Gaia, like Hades and Hecate, for all her materiality, is a rather shadowy character - archaic, undifferentiated. Yet it is through their various interventions that Demeter and Persephone can become differentiated, so that when they once again merge there has been a progression, a change.

The blight on the earth - scorching summer or freezing winter - can be seen as an act of revenge against Gaia, or maybe simply a distraction, neglect. Demeter was so preoccupied with Persephone that everything else was forgotten. In psychological terms it is a projection. For a human, projection means to see in another, actively though unconsciously, qualities one fails to see in oneself. But in the case of a goddess or god, imagining and creating just might be synonymous. Demeter projects, imagines her grief to be all around her, and it becomes so.

Grief is an exile. After the loss of someone important, or the loss of part of oneself, one is separated from, shut out of life. One might as well be on another planet. Sunny days, laughing faces don't make sense, even mock the pain. There is no act of will which catapults one back into life; the exile must take its course until, and if, there is a true point of return. Demeter made a bargain which ensured Persephone would come back for part of the time. In
human terms - since there are few opportunities to strike bargains with the
immortals - the return of Persephone can only mean the renewal, the
regeneration, of Demeter herself.

Before Persephone’s return though, there is a necessary stage of
withdrawing of projection. As she wanders, Demeter is raped and falls
pregnant and she also works as a nursemaid. Becoming nursemaid fits easily
with a withdrawal of projections. Demeter attempts two significant acts, one
fails, one succeeds. Her attempt to confer immortality on the baby prince,
Demophoön, is disastrous. However Demeter later teaches the skills of
agriculture to his brother, Triptolemus. Demeter does not simply withdraw the
bleakness from the world in an act of personal recognition, it requires a more
concrete solution. By passing on her skills to mortals she is relinquishing some
of her control. In compromising over Persephone’s return she allows change,
growth.

The rape by Poseidon, however, remains problematical. It is gratuitous, a
low act, unnecessary exploitation of a grieving mother. But Demeter copes ...
that is what puzzles me most. I am not interested in exploring the degree to
which the story is an allegory of social change, it is the psychological
perspective which intrigues me. Is this the child who becomes the eternal boy?
Is he the precursor of the young hero, to be metamorphosed into the
individualist? If so, he is very much loved, cherished and coddled - perhaps to
the extent of continual control. Is this the mother’s revenge, keeping him
forever a baby? In terms of projection this is still unconscious; if it is a
withdrawal at all - it all happens to Demeter, she doesn’t choose. If I am right,
it is more a regression, a return to eternal springtime.

It is a seductive possibility for the young hero as well, basking in the glow
of adoration of his “dual mothers” (CW 91, §93). He knows well he is special:
of extraordinary origins. He can take the occasional risk - make forays out into the unknown, maybe even bring home some treasures. But it can all be just showing off: "Look Mum, no hands!" Then, when it becomes too claustrophobic, the exploratory games become safely repetitious - rituals to the ever-present, ever-demanding 'Terrible Mother'. What chance the next generation if this one approaches parenthood still seeking the approval of an omnipresent mother and a remote father? If there is to be a journey and quest, it ought to involve a genuine departure and genuine search - genuine risk. The parental knots need to be loosened so that the young hero has the full use of his or her hands.