

MYTH AND THE WATER SIGNS : The Descent of Inanna

If you study astrology for any length of time, you are bound to come across the term “collective unconscious”, and the name C.G. Jung will also come to your attention before too long. Carl Gustav Jung, was not an astrologer. He was a Swiss psychiatrist and psychologist, born in 1875, who devoted much of his work to dream analysis, the study of mythical symbols, and the introduction of ‘archetypes’ (*derived from Greek, archien -beginning, typos - form*). All of these unconscious images, he believed, had a direct and meaningful relationship to man’s physical and emotional wellbeing.

Jung maintained that dreams and myth were linked, but while dreams were personal and their meaning difficult to fathom, myths, on the other hand, were an impersonal, communal projection which arise from a collective, instinctual wisdom which is inherent in mankind’s psyche. Jung claimed that myths give us this universal connection, as the stories from differing cultures, time periods, and regions of the earth, were startlingly similar.

This controversial psychologist whose work explored mythology’s loss to the modern world, claimed myths sprang from the primitive tribes’ mentality as a living religion; the savage did not *invent* myths, but that it *experienced* myth constantly in its physical and spiritual form. The so-called savage lived myth at a broader social, communal and political level as well as experiencing it on a deeply personal and spiritual level. Can we say the same of our belief systems today?

Jung believed so strongly in the power of myth he claimed that man’s drift away from the need to incorporate myth into our lives is much more responsible for modern neuroses, than the more popular belief of his time in Freudian theories of sexual maladjustment. Jung’s theories are frighteningly relevant today. The more science explains our world with ‘logic’, the further we alienate ourselves from primitive thought, and so we are inclined to scoff at ancient ritual and superstition. Jung first coined the phrase ‘*perils of the soul*’, and perhaps this is the risk we take when we become disconnected from the collective experience.

One only has to look at the huge box-office takings of successful movies to see that myth lives on. The key to their success is their ability to recreate the wonder of myth. Nor is their success purely measured in terms of pecuniary reward, the aim is also to create a ‘classic’ : a movie which will live on in the minds and hearts of the audience. The heroes of the ‘classic’ movie are magnifications of our own smaller lives, so it is little wonder that we raise the players of these epics to become demi-gods in our society. In the darkened theatre we gain solace and pleasure from watching and identifying with these ‘superhuman’ figures, fully knowing that their extreme and improbable actions are way beyond the reach of you and I. And yet, we still invest our money (and our emotions) in their story.

How does astrology use mythology?

Generally astrologers use myth to isolate and separate the characteristics of a particular sign and to differentiate it from the rest of the zodiac. However, in our haste to point out the differences between the signs, we often forget to acknowledge their similarities. We sometimes overlook their link through polarity, element or modality, forgetting to acknowledge their kinship is as much their strength, as are their personal distinctions.

By choosing a myth with characters who capture the essence of the three water signs, Cancer, Scorpio, and Pisces, we can tell the story in such a manner that the Element of Water itself can also be expressed.

In Nature (as well as astrology), the element of Water has an intrinsic desire to merge, unify, and blend, and can only be separated if it exists in three separate states : when frozen it becomes solid, when heated it rises as steam, or takes the form of clouds, while in its natural condition it is a fluid. These three separate states of water in its physical form can be related to the three Water signs of the zodiac. For instance, **Cancer** could be said to represent water in its fluid state : its temperament fluctuates as it adapts whatever contains and moulds it. **Scorpio** represents water in its frozen or least responsive state; the native is deep and mysterious, the emotions are fixed and amplified. **Pisces** can be viewed as water in its most vaporous state, it is universal (clouds) and mobile, and in this sign the physical verges towards the metaphysical.

Sheila Farrant in her book, “*Symbols for Woman*”, writes:

“The three Water signs stand like signposts in the Wheel of the Zodiac, signalling our personal birth (Cancer) and death (Scorpio) and the closing of the cycle of creation to start anew (Pisces).”

This connection between the water signs and the cycle of life is reflected in the Greek mythological figures from Greece known as the The Moirae or The Fates. In this myth, the three sisters jointly determine the lifespan of all humans. The Three Fates consist of Klotho, the youngest sister, who presides over the moment of birth, holding the distaff and spinning out the threads of life. *She resembles Cancer who presides over childbirth and the mother, whose nurturing influences our instinctive patterns and unconscious habits- the stuff we are made of.*

The second sister, Lachesis, measures and grants each year of life a portion of joy and woe, hope, fear, peace and strife. *She is an allegory for Scorpio, whose quiet nature masks an understanding of both the light and the dark sides of human nature.*

And the third sister, Atropos, who clips the thread when life is done, separating us from the physical and propelling us towards the Great Unknown. *Part of the Piscean wisdom is to know when to hold on, and when to let go, and so the symbolic connection to Atropos seems obvious.*

Stories of Life and Death

Mesopotamia was once the heart of ancient Middle East, a richly fertile valley, bounded on the west by the river Euphrates, and on the east by the Tigris. The Sumerians occupied the southern part of this area c. 3300BC, and were later conquered by Semitic invaders who had occupied Akkad to the north. The power centre of these invaders was the city of Babylon, and Sumer and Akkad later came to be known jointly as Babylonia. Today Mesopotamia is a central part of Iraq.

Records recovered from this period show the Sumerians invented writing and were using this skill to keep temple records of land assignments, crops and livestock, moving later to writings of epic poetry, law codes, hymns and ritual texts. The Sumerian poem, known as ‘The Descent of Inanna’ is our first recorded mythology, written on clay tablets in the third millennium BC, and detailing the story of Inanna, the Sumerian Queen of Heaven and Earth.

The Descent of Inanna is a wonderful exercise in exploring this culture's view of life and death through myth. To see the story as a symbolic representation of the three Water signs is an added bonus. The myth makes little sense without an introduction to the three major figures and their possible links to archetypes in the zodiac. The connection between goddess and water sign is further explored after the story is told.

Inanna and the sign of Cancer

Inanna, whose titles include 'Sovereign Lady of the Land', 'The Creator Mother', 'Queen of Heaven', was one of the most elevated goddesses of the Sumerians. She was 'The Fertility Goddess' who renewed vegetation and prompted the birth of animals and human beings. Her High Priestesses lived together, and presided over temple lands, and the local communities, dispensing land and food to all. They were expected to care for the orphaned, the elderly, the weak, the woman in confinement, with concern and tenderness. They presided over the distribution of grain and dates as Inanna was a goddess of agriculture, and often her temples doubled as communal storehouses, and bore her emblem - a looped cloth or a bundle of straw. She was the patroness of weaving and pottery. She was also healer, lifegiver, composer of songs - to which she is said to give birth - in fact, she was creative in all realms.

Many poems portray her as loving, jealous, grieving, joyful, timid, generous, in fact a whole range of different and varying emotions. The behaviour of emotions is considered to be in her keeping. From Jacobson's *A History of Mesopotamian Religions*, one ancient poem dedicated to Inanna reads :

*To pester, insult, deride, desecrate - and to venerate
- is your domain, Inanna
Downheartedness, calamity, heartache, and joy and good cheer
- is your domain, Inanna
Tremble, affright, terror - and dazzling and glory
- is your domain, Inanna*

By her qualities I identify Inanna with Cancer.

Ereshkigal and the sign of Scorpio

The next character is Inanna's dark sister, Ereshkigal. She is 'The Queen of Humankind' and is linked to the Fate of humans. Sometimes she is referred to as 'The Birth Giving Mother', but more often she is 'The Queen of Souls'. She rules supreme in the Underworld and she rules her kingdom with complete power and authority.

We are told she is beautiful and passionate and described in songs as residing on her Couch of Pleasures, ready to seduce those who come to her in passion, but she possesses terrible life-freezing eyes - 'Death Eyes', which are pitiless, withdrawn, inevitable.

Ereshkigal is proud, and demands recognition as one of the supreme powers, and she rages when she is not accorded proper reverence and respect. In anger her face turns yellow, her lips black, and she smites her thigh and bites herself. She is full of fury, greed, the fear of loss, and even of self-spite.

Ereshkigal was also originally a grain goddess, but where Inanna represents the plentiful full harvest, the reaping, the storehouse and the feeding of the people; Ereshkigal symbolises 'The Great Round of Nature', grain above ground and growing, the death of the plant, and the seed held underground ready to sprout again. Inanna connects the harvesting of grain with the human cycle, but, by her very nature, Ereshkigal suggests the unstoppable round of birth, growth, decay, death and regeneration - all of which is beyond the realm of human influence.

By her qualities I identify Ereshkigal with Scorpio.

Geshtinanna and the sign of Pisces

Sylvia Brinton Perera, on pg. 89 of her book *Descent to the Goddess* describes Geshtinanna as "a wise-woman : a tablet-knowing scribe, who knows the meaning of words, who knows the meaning of dreams".

The name Geshtinanna means 'vine of heaven' and she is the daughter of Enki, the god of water and wisdom, and his wife, Goddess of the Reeds. Her lineage is divine, but like her brother Dumazi, she is considered to be mortal. In this manner, she belongs to both worlds. Geshtinanna is the sister of the chief shepherd, Dumazi, and as such, she is linked by marriage to the goddess Inanna. She is treated by the gods as a mortal girl, without rank, position, or influence, but she shares a friendship and marriage bond with Inanna. Unlike Inanna, who is unable to personally experience human toil and suffering, Geshtinanna's humanity allows her to engage in all human emotion, and bestows on her the gift of compassion.

In the myth both women descend to the Underworld, but their motivations differ. Inanna is looking for adventure and profit, whilst Geshtinanna's journey to the Land of No Return is motivated by a desire to alleviate suffering. She is the martyr, the victim, the sacrificial lamb, who willingly sacrifices herself for another, and who accepts her fate without anger, bitterness or resentment.

By her qualities I identify Geshtinanna with Pisces.

The Descent of Inanna

The story begins with Inanna's journey to the Underworld. Some interpretations suggest Inanna travelled to her elder sister's home to witness the funeral of Ereshkigal's husband and share in her sister's mourning. Howard Sasportas in *The Gods of Change* favours this version, and paints Ereshkigal as a spiteful, suspicious woman who strikes out at a guileless sister who comes only to provide comfort and support.

However, other versions suggest the funeral is a perfect cover for Inanna who wishes to overthrow her older sister, and take control of both worlds. A later story tells of Inanna's frustration that her humans - her children - whom she takes such care of in the world, inevitably pass under the jurisdiction of her sister. No matter how many lives she creates on earth, her sister will ultimately benefit from her fruitfulness. Inanna's desire to raise the dead and claim them back from the Underworld is known to Ereshkigal who is concerned 'that she will lose her servants who provide her with bread and beer and that she will be made to eat dust and water like the rest of the dead' - a thought which obviously frightens her. The text which reads 'Inanna sets her heart from highest heaven on earth's deepest ground', tends to support Inanna's hidden motives.

Perhaps Inanna anticipates trouble, as she instructs her faithful servant Ninshubar to appeal to the father gods for help in securing her release if she does not return from the Underworld within three days. Whatever the reason for her descent, it is a voluntary act, and she adorns herself as though she were attending a wedding, rather than a funeral. She wears a crown, ear pendants, necklace, breast stones, gold ring, bracelets and a garment of ladyship. She goes dressed as befits her power and prestige in the Upper World.

At the first gate to the Netherworld, the gatekeeper informs Ereshkigal of Inanna's request to enter the underworld. Ereshkigal is furious at this intrusion into her world, and suspecting her younger sister of foul play, she instructs the gatekeeper to enforce the same laws and rites as he would for anyone entering her kingdom.

The gatekeeper follows his orders and at each of the seven portals of the Underworld, he removes another of the trappings of Inanna's divinity. Finally Inanna arrives at the inner sanctum, *'crouched and stripped bare'*, identical to her subjects placed in the grave, and standing before the seven Lords, ready for judgement.

Inanna does not register her change in circumstances and the danger she is in, and she boldly challenges Ereshkigal for the right to rule her sister's kingdom. In the ensuing struggle, the stronger Ereshkigal kills Inanna, and in a pique of rage she denies her sister a royal burial, instead hanging her naked corpse on a peg, where it turns quickly to rotting meat.

The Rescue of Inanna

After three days, without the protection of the Goddess, the earth becomes barren, the crops wither and die, and no living thing is conceived or born. Ninshubar, Inanna's loyal servant, sets in motion her mistress' instructions to rouse the people and gods to help retrieve Inanna. She gains an audience with the gods but they refuse to help as they fear enraging Ereshkigal further, in fact they hint that Inanna's own ambitions have brought about her downfall and she is judged as *'one who craves too much'*. Ninshubar then approaches Enki, a god of water and wisdom, who is also Inanna's maternal grandfather. Enki decides to help and he creates two little sexless beings from the dirt beneath his fingernails and sends them into the Underworld, carrying the plant and water of life.

The beings pass through the portals unchallenged, *'like flies, they flew through the cracks in the doors'* until they are standing before Ereshkigal. As it happens, Ereshkigal is distracted herself, as she is in the initial stages of labour. She is terrified as this is her first child, but she notices the two strange beings, and she cries out to them in pain, *'Woe! Oh, my inside!'*, and they echo her with *'Woe! You who sigh our queen! Oh, your inside'*. Again she cries out, but this time with, *'Woe! Oh, my outside!'* perhaps in horror at the terrible place which is to be her child's birth chamber. The little mourners, as they are called, echo her by saying *'Woe! You who sigh our queen. Oh, your outside'*.

Their echoes form a litany, so that she transcends her pain through their prayer. The goddess is so grateful for their comforting presence she decrees they may have anything they wish, fully aware they have come for Inanna's corpse. The little mourners restore Inanna's life using Enki's gifts, and she is permitted to return to her upper kingdom. However, before she leaves she promises to obey the law and send a substitute in order to maintain a balance of souls in the Underworld. She flees the place of death followed by fierce demons, whose task it is to seize someone chosen by Inanna to take her place.

Once more in the land of the living, Inanna anticipates the forthcoming joyous reunion with her beloved husband Dumazi, whom she fears may be insane with grief for her.

When she reaches her palace she is astounded to find Dumazi has assumed full royalty honours in her absence and is surrounded by courtesans obviously celebrating the death of their Queen. Inanna is enraged but his betrayal and casts 'death eyes' upon her beloved. The demons rush to seize Dumazi but he is too quick and he manages to escape them. Desperate to avoid this terrible fate, he flees to the home of his parents, where he finds his sister Geshtinanna.

He tells Geshtinanna of his terror and adds that he fears a recent dream has prophesied his death, wherein he saw a single reed bowed down in mourning, and two reeds cut down. He asks her to interpret his vision and she sees it as foretelling their mother's mourning at the passing of both her children. She urges her brother to flee, and she vows to protect him by her silence.

Dumazi stays in hiding for a short period, but he cannot escape his destiny and eventually he is dragged off by the demons to the Underworld. Geshtinanna is inconsolable at the loss of her brother, and when she meets Inanna grieving at Dumazi's grave, she recognises a reflection of her own grief in the face of her sister-in-law. Geshtinanna begs for mercy for the soul of her brother and offers up her own life as a substitute for his, in order that her brother can spend a little more time on earth.

Inanna is touched by Geshtinanna's selfless act, and is also tempted by the possibility that Dumazi, whom she still loves, might somehow be restored to her arms, so she pleads to the gods to alter Dumazi's sentence, and thereby entwine the destinies of brother and sister depicted in Dumazi's dream. She decrees that brother and sister shall share the sentence, each one spending six months in the underworld and six months on earth. The goddess Ereshkigal decides to honour this arrangement, and between them the two Great Goddesses of Life and Death, allow Geshtinanna and Dumazi to embody the process of their perpetual Cycle - that of descent and return, return and descent - the endless rearrangement of life's patterns.

Relationship between Myth and Sign

Inanna and Cancer

- * ***Inanna initiates change by her actions.***
Cancer is a Cardinal sign : when it desires or needs something it is inclined to rush in without necessarily knowing how it will back up its initial movement
- * ***Inanna's motives are unclear. Does she want to comfort? Extend her territory? Reclaim her dead children?***
Cancer's motives are not always clear or logical, not just to others, but also they themselves may not understand what drives them as emotions often clouded sound judgement.
- * ***Inanna instructs Ninshubar on how to initiate 'Plan B'.***
Cancer, like Inanna, has a strong survival instinct, as they are aware that their actions may place them in peril, so it often forewarns others in preparation for their own rescue.

- * ***Inanna's challenge for the throne. Inanna refuses to see the impact of the passing through the portals, and that what she originally desired is now out of her reach.***

Cancer often finds it hard to let go of something they desire or they have created, even though reality says it no longer belongs to them. They may pass through a series of metaphorical portals, whereby their position, if they do not alter their course of action, becomes increasingly jeopardised. They run the risk of losing what little ground they have gained if they are unwilling to look at a situation realistically.

- * ***Inanna hangs from the peg : she is inert, beyond suffering, and yet waiting for redemption.***

Cancer can be caught like Inanna, but its 'peg' will be one which has emotional content : like a movie which is constantly re-running, Cancer plays the situation over and over in its mind, each time anguishing over an outcome which they know, but cannot control. The suffering can be unrelenting as they are unable to move off the peg, constantly suffering, but needing someone to recognise and validate their pain. Unfortunately others may perceive Cancer's cry for help as emotional manipulation, which only serves to alienate Cancer further and make the pain more unbearable.

- * ***Inanna's rescue by the little mourners.***

Another's understanding and empathy changes Inanna's situation. Likewise, it can be through the recognition and sharing of their pain that Cancer is able to initiate an action which relieves their situation. Cancer may also act as its own 'little mourners' by its ability to step outside of its own problems and give comfort and nourishment to others. This reflective empathy aids in their own healing and can also be their salvation.

- * ***Inanna's return and her betrayal. Life has cruelly moved on, her loved one has deserted her, and she is deeply hurt and disillusioned.***

Sometimes when Cancer has been caught up in an emotional crisis, they can feel that a heartless world is incapable of understanding their pain. Outsiders and even loved ones urge the Cancerian to continue with their lives, but instead of being comforted, Cancer can view this attitude as a betrayal. This may exacerbate the feeling of being misunderstood, and Cancer may strike out, either destroying its connection with that which it loves, or increasing the isolation. This stage can be harder on Cancer than when it 'hangs from the peg'.

- * ***Inanna's grief over Dumazi's death and her compromise with Geshtinanna.***

Cancer's lesson to learn to let go is a huge one, as it fears, once it has released the thing it holds most dear, that there will be nothing to replace the void. One of their lessons in life is to believe in their own capacity to nurture. If they can do this, they will always be provided with the opportunity to nurture something or someone. Rather than dwelling on past hurts, Cancer's natural desire to believe in the goodness of others, can be a wonderful healing agent. Just as Inanna must compromise in order to find peace, Cancer's desire to fit everything

to its pattern is an issue worthy of compromise, and as long as Cancer is willing to accept others and not try and change them, they will find great fulfilment in their role as Nurturer.

Ereshkigal and Scorpio

* ***Ereshkigal's reputation as Queen of Souls.***

Scorpio can often be treated as the 'Darth Vader' of the zodiac, collecting dark projections and having to deal with so-called Scorpionic personality traits which we are all capable of expressing. Ereshkigal is linked to death not because the goddess is fierce or horrific, but because she is the best one equipped for the job. She takes it seriously and she honours her role in the divine plan. Whilst her 'subjects' may not be exactly thrilled to be in her company, they recognise that she is entrusted with their souls for eternity. Obviously Scorpio carries neither the weight nor the power of this goddess, nevertheless, there are some similarities between the two. Scorpio's power often stems from knowledge. This is not book-learned but rather is the knowledge of the flow and ebb of life's cycles. They instinctively know the patterns which are woven invisibly throughout life and they learn to quietly master the act of weaving. Some say the power of Scorpio is sexual, some say it is monetary, some say it is the power of secrets learned and kept, but whatever form it takes, it comes from the knowledge that the cycle of birth, growth, decay, death and regeneration can never be arrested.

* ***Ereshkigal's reaction to her sister's betrayal.***

Ereshkigal runs the emotional gambit when her sister comes to visit. Initial pleasure that Inanna will join her becomes suspicion of Inanna's motives, then outrage as she engages in a battle for her life in a place which should guarantee her safety. When the relative turned enemy dies, Ereshkigal masks her pain with a vindictive act and a desire for revenge. One thing Scorpio cannot abide is betrayal. If you lose the trust of a Scorpio you may not realise it, as they are not usually confrontational people, but they will never let you get close to them again. To Scorpio it is not a lack of forgiveness - it is purely a matter of survival.

* ***Ereshkigal denies Inanna the dignities of a correct burial.***

Scorpio can be known to demonstrate a 'show of power', to over-react, or to gloat in its victory. This tends to lose sympathy with others, thereby isolating them and adding to their vulnerability.

* ***Ereshkigal gives birth in the Underworld.***

Scorpio understands the fine thread from which all souls emerge - the collective, birth and death, and the return to the collective - so often views life in a detached and fatalistic manner which can be misinterpreted by others as hardness or insensitivity. Sometimes Scorpio does little to correct this misrepresentation, as they usually abhor the public display of emotion. They can be as surprised as the next person by the depth of their passion, which is highly embarrassing for them if others witness their intensity. This is part of the mystery of the Scorpio, who always seems to be holding something back.

- * ***Ereshkigal mourns for the child and the world it must enter.***
Sometimes Scorpio can be a little too bleak for its own good. Of course, if it always caters for the worst it can never be disappointed, but this dark view can blind it to the delights of experiencing life as a constant stream of wonderful opportunities.
- * ***Ereshkigal's gratitude to the little mourners and her act of generosity.***
Once a Scorpio feels its is understood and trusts another they can be lavish in their generosity of spirit.
- * ***The Balance maintained : the Debt is paid.***
Scorpio, like Ereshkigal, understands that the balance of Life and Death must always be maintained. Each credit has a corresponding debit; each particle of joy will come with an equal measure of pain. While the preceding sign of Libra loves balance for its beauty and harmony, Scorpio approaches balance with a fierce passion, intent on maintaining the status quo, regardless of the costs involved.

Geshtinanna and Pisces

- * ***The invisibility of Geshtinanna.***
Whether by choice or by birth, Geshtinanna, does not appear as easily definable as her more prominent sisters. Likewise, Pisces, whether by desire or circumstance, can appear (or desire) to be invisible at times.
- * ***Geshtinanna's nature as gentle, passive, and accepting.***
Geshtinanna's (and Pisces) qualities lie in her gentle nature, her desire to serve, rather than be waited on by others, or acknowledged for her divine connections. She moves amongst the gods and the mortal world as though she belongs in both worlds.
- * ***Geshtinanna arrives late in the story, when all things seem decided.***
Geshtinanna's role in the story seems almost incidental, as though she has accidentally gotten caught up in something which is not of her making. Pisces too can seem to be 'uninvolved' and yet their role in situations can become pivotal in the outcome of the situation. Seemingly passive, and yet totally necessary.
- * ***Geshtinanna believes in Fate.***
Geshtinanna interprets Dumazi's dream, understanding that her fate is decided in the same dream. Pisces has a deep connection between the unconscious and the waking world, and their acceptance can seem to others to be a lack of 'fight' or cowardliness, when perhaps to do nothing requires the greatest act of courage
- * ***Geshtinanna's ultimate act of sacrifice.***
Many Pisceans perform acts of sacrifice and selflessness which go unnoticed or unrewarded by others. They can lead lives of 'quiet desperation', making them unreachable - much as Geshtinanna became unreachable - to those who love them. Their dark Underworlds are private and inaccessible, frustrating and incomprehensible to outsiders, who tell them to 'buck up' and get on with Life.

* ***Six months Above : six months Below.***

Of all the signs, Pisces understands and accepts that life is just a series of continuums. Others in the Zodiac may gloriously fight, deny or ignore the ongoing cycle, but to Pisces it is as natural and unconscious as drawing the next breath, so perhaps they teach the rest of us that there is hope, that there is salvation, in whatever form or direction we chose to believe in. Pisces' gentle acceptance of life in all its forms possibly subscribes to the philosophy that it probably doesn't matter how we choose to pass our life's journey, as ultimately we all belong to the gods in the end, and by belonging, we ourselves become perpetual, everlasting, and by association, immortal.

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