

Reimagining the Self: The Sage, the Wise Old One, and the Elder

by Jack A. Graham, M.Div.

Our imagination around the Self is represented by a number of archetypes—Sage, Christ, King, Queen, Senex, Crone, Holy Child. While the Self is ageless, and ultimately formless, we reach for the ultimate in human maturing. Initially, our thinking about maturity and wisdom may go to the Elder, differentiating the Elder from someone who is simply older in years.

What is the difference between the archetypal Senex/Crone and an elder? The following suggests that our idea of the archetype of the Wise One as the archetype of the actualized Self is dramatically changing.

“We find ourselves in no real contact with the forces that are shaping our future,” wrote astronomer Fred Hoyle in *Of Men and Galaxies* (1965).¹ That sentence challenged psychologist James Hillman to say we must find the *psychic connection* between past and future. In a brilliant chapter titled “Senex and Puer” later published in *Puer Papers*.² Hillman saw the disconnect between past and future expressed in the polarity between Senex and Puer, the Old Man and the Youth. This polarity of “Father Time” and “Eternal Youth,” temporality and eternity, was a major key for unlocking our collective inability to see where we have come from and where we are going.³ Soul is a bridge between past and future, Hillman added, “Without the sense of soul, we have no sense of history. We never enter it.” So he set out to find the soul of each.

Hillman powerfully mapped the archetypal pairing of the Senex/Puer association as aspects of soul that bridge past and future. This present article looks at a related archetypal pairing, the Senex and the Elder, both being initially identified as belonging to the second half of life. As we differentiate between these two we are reminded that any archetype is not a specific “thing;” an archetype cannot be pinned down and defined.

In speaking of both Senex and Elder, we are referring to a number of “faces” that are always dynamically changing. It is one of the psychological blessings of archetypes that they cannot be precisely defined or taken literally, meaning that the psyche/soul cannot be a defined psychic entity, but rather is an experience. This ineffability of the archetype is particularly crucial in understanding the Senex, and the Sage for they lie beyond the grasp of ego and mind. This further invites reimagination of the Self.

Moreover, does the masculine Senex have a feminine counterpart in the Crone? There is controversy here, and the history

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of the evolving Crone archetype is beyond the scope of this article. Feminists rightfully insist on the Crone as a wisdom figure in her own right, independent of the masculine,⁴ although no archetype is really independent.

Both Carl Jung and Carl Kerényi discuss the archetype of the Triple Goddess, Maiden, Mother, and Crone. With the doctrine of the Assumption of Mary in 1950, Jung saw the necessary addition of the feminine to the masculine Trinity (i.e., Mary was added to the Trinity). Hence, the Crone and Mother are seen as essential to a complete quaternity, an archetype of wholeness.⁵ The net of all of this in the opinion of this author is that the archetype of the Crone now holds the same link to wholeness and divinity and Self as the Senex.

The Senex/Crone has been used to refer to figures who have virtues of wisdom but also have moral short-comings, and developmental flaws. One thinks of Merlin, Odysseus, Gilgamesh, Psyche, Joan of Arc, Mother Teresa. As if to rehabilitate or elevate to new heights more positive Senex and Crone figures, we have recently seen archetypal wise-sage figures such as Obi-Wan Kenobi in Star Wars, Gandalf from Lord of the Rings, and Albus Dumbledore from Harry Potter.

As the West is becoming acquainted with advanced spiritual gurus, such as Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Sri Ramana Maharshi, Mirabai, Yogananda, and Krishnamurti, there is a growing movement to see parallels in the spiritual sages of Christianity (St Frances, Augustine, Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart, Teresa of Avila), Islam (Rumi, Hafiz, Kabir, Rabi'a), and Judaism (Moses Cordovera, Baal Shem Tov, Dov Baer of Mezeritch, Mary Magdalene, and a number of other rabbinic sages), for their wisdom is the same as those Eastern sages with cultural variants. This invites us to look anew at the archetypes of the wise as a *much more elevated figure*, one who reaches the highest levels of spiritual development.

What has happened in the modern world that prompts us to recently elevate the reach of the archetypes of the possible human (male and female) to the level of divinity? Those who are familiar with the universal wisdom (also called the Perennial Wisdom, Qabalah, Mystical Christianity, Sufism, esoteric Taoism, Buddhism, and Vedantism) are saying this higher knowing is now available to anyone. Previously the higher knowledge had been “closed door” and kept from the public for millennia, that is, it was held in the collective unconscious. In our time there is a collective receptivity and development that allows this knowledge to be released to everyone. This fact necessitates a profound awakening of the higher archetype of the Wise Old Man, Wise Old Woman, or Wise Sage.

The Senex and Crone (or collectively, the Sage) in their ultimate development are archetypal personifications of the Higher Self. That is, in their highest reaches, they are images of the woman or man who has realized the Self.

While the ancient scriptures of all religions abound with teachings about the goal of the spiritual journey being the realization of the Self, it is clearest in the Hindu *Advaita Vedanta*, which has permeated American culture since the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, although it first found its way here with Ralph Waldo Emerson.⁶ Jung was completely aware that he was basing his distinction between lower self and Higher Self in the tradition of the Perennial Wisdom. In Christianity, this teaching is found in the image of the Kingdom, in Judaism it is expressed in Ezekiel and his mysticism, the Zohar, and in



Detail of Gandalf from *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*

the omnipresent *Shema* (Deut. 4:6, “the Lord is One”)—these all are expressions of non-dualism. Sufism, which predates Islam, also differentiates between the individual ego-self and the universal Self that lies within every person.

More recently the core non-dual aspects of reality have at last come to the conscious attention of science and psychology. This understanding sees that true Reality lies in a non-separate oneness, where any differentiation between forms or between form and the formless is ultimately something we make up. The fully developed Senex/Crone realizes this.

Here is the catch. One cannot grasp the Self with the mind; one cannot think one's way to the Self. The Self/Ultimate Reality by definition lies in the unconscious, and will always be so because the human mind is finite. We cannot have infinite thoughts. But there is a kind of knowing that transcends the finite mind. It is a knowing that comes from experience, not thinking.

Knowing that ultimate reality and the archetype of the Self was beyond words, Jung spoke as a Senex when John Freeman interviewed him on television in October 1959, and he asked him: ‘Do you *believe* in God?’ Jung said in slight paraphrase, “No, but I have *experienced* God.”

The reach of the Senex/Crone is one who has knowledge of

ultimate Reality. And when one has become established in that knowing, they no longer are limited by time and space and the finite world. They are established in the Universal Self which is the Self of all Selves and there is no longer individual identity or ego in that state.

Psychologically, we have hardly begun to approach an understanding of the Senex/Crone who has realized the Self. We have not been taught to recognize these figures and what they offer to us, but there are many hundreds of these figures in our actual history. There are a number of these Self-realized figures walking among us, but they generally keep this secret (they have no ego). The time has come for us to embrace this level of human development in our spirituality and in our psychology.

The Elder is someone who knows something about this kind of attainment. The Elder understands the journey into Self-realization, but may still be far from such realization personally. The Elder understands the nature of the outer journey of individuating from family and culture, the outer experience with the collective conscious, the play of personas and other adaptations and plays of ego, and the illusions of power and fame and success. The elder has come to understand how the first half of life has been to create a spiritual, psychological and embodied container to work with the real questions as well as the pain of the losses and the emptying out in the dissolution of the lesser self that obscures the true Self.

The Elder begins to see the “frames” of finite imagination and psyche around all of our stories. The Elder has “raised the child,” both inner and outer, and has come to understand the wisdom of the puer-senex integration with higher trust required to realize the Kingdom.

The Elder understands that “dying ten thousand deaths before you die” is the way to becoming what lives forever. The Elder understands that such emptying of psychic content is not a metaphysical principle, not an active stance, not a psychological project, but it becomes the art of allowing life to move through one. The Elder experiences increasing acceptance and equanimity around whatever happens, knowing it all is the Way to Self. The Elder becomes adept in embracing and letting go. As such, others around the Elder feel her/his strength, his/her vital aliveness beyond aging, and his/her lack of attachment, they too feel the *presence* of that which is Higher.

Among many other qualities of the wise Elder who is often a “Way-Shower” in the community, is a struggle dear to conscious Jungians. Marie Louise von Franz states, “If an individual has wrestled seriously and long enough with the anima (or animus)... The unconscious again changes its dominant character and appears in a new symbolic form...as an initiator, guardian, a guru/teacher, a *wise old man*...”⁷

There is a call to understand more deeply the relationship with the unconscious (including the Self) that finds its omnipresent expression in the anima/animus, particularly as these are now moving beyond gender identification. The sages call this soul work, and it lies beyond theories, beliefs, and the mind.

The Elder is to be differentiated from the Senex or Crone, but has an experiential grasp of the path to becoming a realized master. One does not understand the fully-developed Senex/Crone until he/she has *become that*. But the Elder knows that

all our ideas and theories about the embodiment of Self are illusory, although not useless. The Elder understands the nature of the Way to the Higher Self and also understands the fictions of one’s ideas about all that.

The intent of this little article was not to reach a scholarly definition of either the archetypal Senex or Elder (which would be foolish anyway), but to issue an invitation to explore a higher image of the archetypes of Senex and Crone in human form, commensurate with the highest of the spiritual masters, and to see the Elder as a figure aware of the path of universal wisdom and a teacher and guide among those who seek the way.

*Little by little God takes away human beauty:
little by little the sapling withers.
Go, recite “To whomever We give a length of days,
We also cause them to decline.”
Seek the spirit;
Don’t set your heart on bones.*
— Rumi

Rumi says, “Little by little God takes away human beauty” and we might add, “and God replaces it with a higher Beauty.”

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- ¹ Fred Hoyle, *Of Men and Galaxies*, London: Heinemann, 1965, p.65.
- ² Puer Papers, ed. by James Hillman, Dallas: Spring Publications, 1979, p. 4. Earlier published as “Senex and Puer: An aspect of the Historical and Psychological Present,” in *Polarität des Lebens*, Eranos Jahrbuch, 1967, Zurich: Rein Verlag, 1968.
- ³ Puer Papers, p. 8.
- ⁴ Naomi Goldenberg, for instance, suggests that “feminist theory radically depart from the Jungian archetypes, from the Platonic form, and from all systems of thought that posit transcendent, superhuman deities” in Naomi R. Goldenberg, “Archetypal Theory and the Separation of Mind and Body”, in *Weaving the Visions: Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, ed. Plaskow and Christ, Harper, San Francisco, 1989, p 249.
- ⁵ Carl Jung, in *Psychology and Alchemy*, CW 12, pars 26, 31, 319ff; *Psychology and Religion: West and East*, Vol 11, par. 107, *The Collected Works of Carl G. Jung*, tr. R.F.C. Hull. Bollingen Series XX, Princeton University Press.
- ⁶ Goldberg, Philip, *American Veda*, New York: Harmony Books 2010, p.32 ff.
- ⁷ Marie-Louise Von Franz, (1978) “The Process of Individuation” in C. G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols*, London: Picador, p. 207-208.