

PAPER

FROM COSMIC ORDER TO INNER REALITY: THE UNDERWORLD AS A MODEL OF MODERN SUBJECTIVITY

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Abstract

This article examines the transformation of the concept of the underworld from an element of ancient cosmic order into a model of modern subjectivity. Drawing on mythological traditions such as Hades, Duat, and Hel, as well as psychological theories developed by Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, the study explores how the underworld has shifted from an external metaphysical space to an internal psychological reality. The article argues that this transformation reflects a broader shift in human self-understanding, where symbolic descent into the underworld corresponds to processes of confronting the unconscious, integrating the shadow, and forming modern identity. The underworld is thus reinterpreted as a metaphorical structure through which the complexities of contemporary subjectivity can be understood.

Key words: Underworld; modern subjectivity; ancient cosmology; comparative mythology; psychoanalysis; Sigmund Freud; Carl Jung; unconscious mind; symbolic descent; archetypes; shadow integration; mythological transformation

Introduction

The concept of the underworld has historically occupied a central position in mythological and cosmological systems, functioning not merely as a realm of the dead but as an integral component of a structured universe. In ancient traditions, such as those of Hades, Duat, and Hel, the underworld

was embedded within a tripartite cosmology that articulated the relationship between life, death, and transcendence. These mythological frameworks positioned descent into the underworld not as an anomaly, but as a necessary structural and symbolic process within the order of the cosmos.

However, with the emergence of modern philosophical and psychological thought, this

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externalized cosmological structure underwent a profound transformation. In particular, the development of depth psychology in the works of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung contributed to a conceptual shift in which the underworld ceased to function primarily as an external spatial domain and instead became internalized as a dimension of the human psyche.

Despite extensive scholarship on mythological symbolism and psychoanalytic theory separately, relatively little attention has been given to the underworld as a continuous conceptual bridge between ancient cosmology and modern subjectivity. This gap is particularly significant given that narratives of descent—often described through the motif of katabasis—continue to structure contemporary understandings of identity, crisis, and psychological transformation.

This article therefore seeks to reconceptualize the underworld as a theoretical model for modern subjectivity. It argues that the movement from cosmic order to inner reality reflects a broader epistemological shift in which mythological structures are reconfigured as psychological processes. By combining comparative mythology with conceptual analysis, the study aims to demonstrate how the underworld persists not as a relic of ancient belief systems, but as an enduring framework for interpreting the formation of the modern self.

2. Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with the concept of the underworld has traditionally developed along two parallel trajectories: mythological studies and depth psychology. Within the field of comparative mythology, the underworld has been extensively analyzed as a structural component of ancient cosmologies. Studies of Greek mythology emphasize Hades as a domain governing death and moral order, while Egyptian religious texts describe Duat as a liminal space of transformation and judgment. Similarly, Norse cosmology conceptualizes Hel as a realm that reflects ontological separation between worlds of existence.

In classical mythological scholarship, these underworld systems have primarily been

interpreted as symbolic representations of death, transition, and cosmic balance. Researchers such as Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell have emphasized the archetypal function of descent narratives, particularly the motif of katabasis, as a universal structure in mythic storytelling. These interpretations position the underworld as an essential component of mythic consciousness rather than a marginal cosmological feature.

In parallel, psychological and psychoanalytic traditions have reinterpreted mythological structures as expressions of the human psyche. The work of Sigmund Freud introduced the concept of the unconscious as a hidden domain of repressed desires and instincts, effectively relocating mythic “depth” into the interior of the subject. Building on this foundation, Carl Jung expanded the framework of depth psychology by introducing archetypes and the collective unconscious, thereby re-establishing mythological structures as intrinsic components of psychic reality.

Despite these contributions, existing scholarship tends to treat mythological underworlds and psychological unconsciousness as separate analytical domains. Mythologists emphasize cultural-symbolic meaning, while psychologists focus on intrapsychic structures. What remains underexplored is the conceptual continuity between these domains—namely, how the underworld functions as a persistent epistemic model that migrates from external cosmology into internal subjectivity.

This article addresses this gap by proposing that the underworld should be understood not merely as a mythological motif or psychological metaphor, but as a transhistorical model of subject formation. In doing so, it bridges comparative mythology and depth psychology to reconceptualize the underworld as a foundational structure of modern subjectivity.

3. Main Body.

3.1 The Underworld as a Cosmological Structure

In ancient cosmological systems, the underworld functioned as an essential ontological layer that sustained the balance of the universe. Rather than being conceived as an isolated domain of punishment or death, realms such as Hades, Duat,

and Hel were integrated into a tripartite structure of existence that included the heavens, the earthly realm, and the underworld.

In this framework, descent into the underworld was not an abnormal rupture but a regulated cosmological movement. Myths of descent (katabasis) symbolized transition, renewal, and the cyclical nature of existence. The underworld therefore operated as a necessary counterpart to life, ensuring cosmic equilibrium and narrative completeness within mythological systems.

3.2 Internalization of Myth: From Cosmos to Psyche

The transition from pre-modern cosmology to modern subjectivity is marked by a gradual internalization of external mythological structures. In this process, spatial metaphysical domains are reconfigured as psychological dimensions.

The psychoanalytic model of Sigmund Freud plays a decisive role in this transformation. Freud's conceptualization of the unconscious introduces an inner "depth" structure characterized by repression, desire, and return of the repressed. This structure mirrors the logic of the underworld, where hidden contents influence surface reality. Similarly, Carl Jung extends this internalization through the theory of archetypes and the collective unconscious. In Jungian thought, mythological figures and narratives are not external cultural artifacts but manifestations of deep psychic structures shared across humanity. This move effectively relocates mythological cosmology into the interior architecture of the psyche.

3.3 Katabasis and the Structure of Subject Formation

The motif of descent, or katabasis, becomes central to understanding modern subjectivity. In classical mythology, katabasis refers to the descent of a hero into the underworld and subsequent return. In modern psychological terms, this structure can be interpreted as a model of self-transformation.

The subject is constituted through processes of internal descent, involving confrontation with repressed material, destabilization of identity, and reintegration of fragmented aspects of the self. This process reflects what depth psychology identifies as shadow confrontation and integration.

Within this framework, the underworld is no

longer a geographical or metaphysical space but a structural condition of subject formation. It represents the necessary encounter with internal alterity—the parts of the self that are excluded from conscious identity yet remain operative in shaping behavior, desire, and perception.

3.4 The Underworld as a Model of Modern Subjectivity

In contemporary theoretical discourse, subjectivity is increasingly understood as fragmented, dynamic, and internally conflicted. Post-structural and psychoanalytic approaches converge on the idea that the self is not unified but constructed through layers of conscious and unconscious processes.

Within this context, the underworld emerges as a powerful epistemic model. It provides a spatial metaphor for understanding depth, repression, memory, and transformation. Unlike classical cosmology, however, modern interpretations no longer locate meaning in external divine order but in internal psychic complexity.

Thus, the underworld persists as a conceptual structure that organizes modern subjectivity. It functions as both a metaphor and a model: a metaphor for unconscious depth and a model for the dynamics of self-formation. The persistence of descent narratives in literature, psychology, and philosophy indicates that the logic of the underworld continues to shape contemporary understandings of identity.

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodological framework that integrates comparative mythology with conceptual and hermeneutic analysis. The aim is not empirical measurement but theoretical reconstruction of the underworld as a transhistorical model of subjectivity.

4.1 Research Design

The research is designed as a conceptual-analytical study grounded in interpretive humanities. It investigates the transformation of the underworld from an external cosmological structure into an internal psychological model. The analysis is structured around two primary domains: (1) ancient mythological systems and (2) modern

depth psychology.

Mythological material is examined through selected cultural frameworks, including Hades, Duat, and Hel, while psychological interpretation is grounded in the theoretical contributions of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung.

4.2 Analytical Approach

The study adopts a hermeneutic and comparative interpretive approach. Hermeneutics is used to analyze mythological narratives as symbolic systems rather than literal belief structures. Comparative mythology provides the framework for identifying structural similarities across different cultural representations of the underworld.

In addition, conceptual analysis is applied to trace the migration of key motifs—such as descent, death, transformation, and return—from cosmological narratives into psychological theory. This allows for the identification of continuity between mythological and psychoanalytic structures.

4.3 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is interdisciplinary, combining: Comparative mythology (structural analysis of mythic systems) Depth psychology (Freudian and Jungian models of the unconscious) Symbolic anthropology (myth as cultural cognition) Philosophical anthropology (the formation of subjectivity) Within this framework, the underworld is treated as a “transitional epistemic model” that operates across both cosmological and psychological registers.

4.4 Data Sources and Materials

The primary materials for analysis consist of mythological texts, symbolic narratives, and classical interpretations of underworld myths. These are supplemented by foundational psychoanalytic texts by Sigmund Freud and analytical psychology writings by Carl Jung. Rather than empirical datasets, the study relies on interpretive textual corpora, including mythological narratives, scholarly commentaries, and theoretical writings in psychology and philosophy.

4.5 Limitations

This study is limited by its conceptual nature and does not aim to provide empirical validation.

Its conclusions are interpretive and theoretical, focusing on structural correspondences rather than causal verification. Additionally, the selection of mythological systems is illustrative rather than exhaustive.

5. Conclusion

This study has reinterpreted the underworld not as a marginal mythological construct, but as a persistent and transformative epistemic model for understanding modern subjectivity. By tracing its evolution from ancient cosmological systems such as Hades, Duat, and Hel to its psychological internalization in the works of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, the article has demonstrated a structural continuity between mythological descent and psychic interiority.

The central argument advanced is that modern subjectivity is constituted through the logic of descent—understood as *katabasis*—whereby the self is formed through encounters with its own hidden, repressed, or fragmented dimensions. In this sense, the underworld is no longer located in a metaphysical “below,” but is reconfigured as an internal depth structure that organizes consciousness, memory, and identity.

This shift from external cosmological order to internal psychological reality reflects a broader epistemological transformation in the history of thought. Mythological structures that once explained the universe have not disappeared; rather, they have been re-inscribed within the architecture of the modern psyche. As a result, the underworld persists as a conceptual and symbolic framework through which processes of identity formation, psychic conflict, and transformation can be understood.

Ultimately, the study contributes to bridging comparative mythology and depth psychology by demonstrating that the underworld operates as a transhistorical model of subject formation. Future research may further expand this framework by exploring its manifestations in literature, contemporary media, and digital culture, where narratives of descent continue to structure representations of the self and its inner complexities.

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