

**A JUNGIAN ARCHETYPAL ANALYSIS OF EARNEST CLINE'S *READY
PLAYER ONE*: QUEST FOR THE AXIS MUNDI**

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Master of Arts Thesis**

Department of English Language and Literature

Miraç ÖZKURT

Supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Meltem UZUNOĞLU ERTEN

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DENİZLİ

I hereby declare that all information in this document has been presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct. I also declare that as required by these rules and conduct I have fully cited and referenced all material and results that are not original to this work.

Name, Last Name: Miraç Özkurt

Signature:

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To my wife and my family

ABSTRACT**A JUNGIAN ARCHETYPAL ANALYSIS OF EARNEST CLINE’S READY
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Özkurt, Miraç

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Literature serves as both a creative and expressive endeavour, generating works that not only hold aesthetic value but also reflect the multifaceted nature of societal existence. Archetypes, universally recognized patterns embedded in the collective human unconsciousness, take various forms in mythology, dreams, folklore and mostly in literary works. Ernest Cline’s dystopian science fiction novel “*Ready Player One*” provides a vivid example of such archetypes, particularly a character vested with immense power who embarks on a transformative journey. In a challenging environment, this character evolves, gaining substantial self-assurance through a series of enlightening experiences.

The novel introduces readers to a rich tapestry of mythological imagery and archetypes, navigating the concept of hyper-reality, a term initially coined by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard. Through a meticulous qualitative analysis, this research examines how Cline employs these elements to explore hyper-reality. The study argues that the increasing blurring of reality in postmodern societies triggers humanity’s search for purpose and meaning symbolized through the quest for the “Axis Mundi” archetype that is described by Carl Gustav Jung. Additionally, this study incorporates insights from ludology—the study of games and play—as a supplementary framework. While not the primary methodological focus, this ludological perspective enriches the analysis and allows for an interdisciplinary approach, bridging the gap between literature and game studies.

Keywords: Archetype, Psychoanalysis, Hyper-Reality, Mythology, Ludology

ÖZET

EARNEST CLINE'IN *READY PLAYER ONE* ROMANININ JUNGCU ARKETİPSEL ANALİZİ: AXIS MUNDİ ARAYIŞI

Özkurt, Miraç

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Edebiyat, estetik değeri olan eserler üreten ve aynı zamanda toplumsal varoluşun çok yönlü doğasını yansıtan hem yaratıcı hem de ifade edici bir çabadır. Evrensel olarak tanınan arketipler, kolektif insan bilinçdışına gömülü desenler gibi çeşitli formlarda, mitoloji, rüyalar, folklor ve en çok da edebi eserler içerisinde ortaya çıkar. Ernest Cline'in distopik bilim kurgu romanı "*Ready Player One*," bu tür arketiplerin canlı bir örneğini sunar, özellikle büyük güce sahip bir karakterin dönüştürücü bir yolculuğa çıkmasını anlatır. Zorlu bir ortamda, bu karakter, aydınlatıcı bir dizi deneyim aracılığıyla önemli bir özgüven kazanır.

Roman, okuyucuları Fransız filozof Jean Baudrillard tarafından ortaya atılan hiper-gerçeklik kavramını keşfetmek için mitolojik imgeler ve arketiplerle zengin bir dokuya sokar. Bu titiz niteliksel analiz aracılığıyla, bu araştırma Cline'in bu öğeleri hiper-gerçeklik konusunu keşfetmek için nasıl kullandığını incelemektedir. Çalışma, postmodern toplumlarda gerçekliğin giderek bulanıklaşmasının, Carl Gustav Jung tarafından tanımlanan "Axis Mundi" arketipi ile sembolize edilen insanlığın amaç ve anlam arayışını tetiklediğini savunmaktadır. Ayrıca, bu çalışma oyun ve oyunbilim konusunda iç görüler sunan ludolojiyi ek bir çerçeve olarak kullanmaktadır. Temel metodolojik odak noktası olmamasına rağmen, bu ludolojik perspektif analizi zenginleştirir ve edebiyat ile oyun çalışmaları arasında disiplinlerarası bir yaklaşım sağlar.

Anahtar kelimeler: Arketipler, Psikanaliz, Hiper-Gerçeklik, Mitoloji, Ludoloji

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PLAGIARISM.....	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
DEDICATION.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
ÖZET.....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
INTRODUCTION.....	1

CHAPTER I

TOWARDS A DECENTRALIZED WORLD

1.1. Lost in the Modern Chaos.....	6
1.2. Inside the World of the Individual.....	8
1.3. The Fluidlike Reality.....	10

CHAPTER II

LONGING FOR A PURPOSE, LOOKING FOR A MEANING

2.1. Dystopias vs. Utopias.....	16
2.2. Into the Labyrinth of the Human Mind.....	19
2.3. The Heritage of Humanity: The Collective Unconscious.....	25
2.4. More on Archetypes.....	32
2.5. A Centre to Hold Tight: The Axis Mundi.....	36

CHAPTER III

READY PLAYER ONE: ANALYSIS

3.1. Regaining a Stable Ground.....	39
3.2. Are you Ready, Player One?.....	41
3.3. Archetypes of the OASIS.....	55
CONCLUSION.....	70
BIBLIOGRAPGHY.....	77
VITA.....	81

INTRODUCTION

The primary objective of this thesis is to meticulously analyse and exemplify the contemporary human endeavour in the search for purpose and meaning in life, symbolized through the Jungian archetype of the Axis Mundi in Ernest Cline's 2011 Sci-fi novel: *Ready Player One*. The Axis Mundi, in other words, the centre of the world, is an archetype that comes to the surface when there is a need for a safe and stable point in people's lives. Through an extensive and profound analysis of Ernest Cline's novel, the study unfurls a rich tapestry woven from the contrasting threads of utopian and dystopian, archetypal, ludologic, and psychoanalytic elements within the narrative.

In the expansive realm of literature, two distinct and compelling genres stand tall: utopia and dystopia. The former presents an alluring vision of an idealised existence, while the latter plunges us into the abyss of societal and environmental bleakness. Yet, within these literary realms, the notion of achieving a utopian state remains a tantalizing mirage—an ethereal dream that eludes our grasp. The word “utopia” itself, stemming from the Greek prefix “ou,” signifies negation or the absence of existence (Alihodzic and Jerkovic, 2016). It evokes a place that is, by definition, unattainable, a fantastical realm forever beyond the boundaries of reality which fits perfectly into the Sci-fi genre.

The enthralling pages of *Ready Player One* provide us with a glimpse into a virtual wonderland known as the OASIS—a tangible embodiment of utopian aspirations amidst a dystopian world. The OASIS, or “The Ontology Anthropocentric Sensory Immersive Simulations,” (Cline, 2011: 48) emerges as a sprawling, multifaceted multiplayer online game. Here, individuals wield the power to craft and assume identities of their choosing, transcending the shackles of the physical world to inhabit virtual realms bound only by the limits of imagination. This narrative device is not merely an imaginative construct but serves as an avenue for deeper psychoanalytic and archetypal explorations, engendering a compelling juxtaposition between the bleak reality and the boundless virtual domain.

But this research aspires to journey even deeper into the heart of *Ready Player One*, venturing into the enigmatic terrain of hyper-reality that it artfully explores. With a lens

tinted with mythological imagery and universal archetypes residing in the collective human psyche, this study endeavours to bridge a critical gap in the existing scholarship, offering a meticulous and holistic analysis of this literary gem. At its core, this study probes the profound phenomenon of reality's erosion in the tapestry of postmodern society, casting a discerning light upon this phenomenon through the lens of archetypal theory.

Our contemporary era, marked by the rapid proliferation of technology and the instantaneous accessibility of information, engenders a landscape of paradoxes. The advancement in technology, while offering unfettered access to a vast repository of knowledge, also wields the power to significantly sway human perceptions. The media and internet culture emerge as chief architects of these perceptual shifts, continuously shaping and reshaping the context and essence of the information they deliver. This era witnesses a surreal transition where words have surrendered their primacy to images—images that not only mirror but, in some instances, augment reality itself.

In this theoretical framework, a quest is embarked upon to unravel why individuals, ensconced in postmodern cultures, find themselves ensnared in the web of artificial knowledge. The intricacies of this artificiality and the faint whispers questioning it amidst the digital wind are contemplated upon. This new social order, painstakingly painted with Jean Baudrillard's varied concepts, is dissected to understand how media and technology have fundamentally metamorphosed our perceptions of the physical world. This exploration briefly grapples with the complex issue of identity formation and societal positioning in a postmodern world, where the boundary between reality and phenomena becomes increasingly porous, rendering the task of self-discovery a Herculean feat.

In drawing upon the analytical prowess of venerable scholar Carl Gustav Jung, this exploration seeks to illuminate the concept of hyper-reality as depicted in the novel. The meticulous journey through Jung's archetypal theories uncovers the profound interplay between mythological imagery and both individual and universal archetypes, evoking deeper layers of understanding concerning the relentless human quest for authentic reality—a quest conducted within the complex confines of hyper-reality and masterfully depicted in *Ready Player One* (Jung, 1959). Through this lens, the narrative unveils a nuanced dialogue between the tangible and the imagined, resonating with Jung's insights into the collective unconscious and the archetypal underpinnings of human experience.

This thesis is organized into three main chapters, bookended by an introduction and a conclusion. The first two chapters lay the theoretical groundwork, while the third delves into an in-depth analysis of Ernest Cline's novel; *Ready Player One*.

The first chapter encapsulates the modern condition of humanity, delineating the fragmentation of soul and body endemic to contemporary existential crises. It outlines the emergence of psychoanalysis as a reactive discourse to these fragmentations, chronicling the transition of theoretical frameworks from Joseph Breuer to Sigmund Freud, with a focal examination of their distinctive approaches to personality and consciousness. As the narrative progresses, the discourse shifts towards Jung's theorization, particularly his conceptualization of the collective unconscious and a spectrum of archetypes. Central to this exploration is the image of a universal pillar, the Axis Mundi archetype, a symbolic representation of a fixed point of connection between the infinite and the finite, the known and the unknown, effectively illustrating the cosmic order. The chapter delves into the descriptive analysis of the Axis Mundi, shedding light on how its loss in the modern and postmodern era has precipitated a descent into what Baudrillard termed as hyperreality—a state of consciousness enveloped in the surreal yet devoid of absolute reality, thereby reflecting the dystopian undertones of the 20th century world. This chapter sets the preliminary theoretical and methodological groundwork, paving the way for a deeper examination of these concepts in the subsequent analysis (Eliade, 1959: 36).

The second chapter searches further through theoretical vistas, anchoring on the postmodern condition while casting a spotlight on Baudrillard's notions of simulation and simulacra. This discussion unfolds the realm of 'hyperreality,' a critical lens through which our primary text is examined (Baudrillard, 1994: 23). Amid the reflections on postmodern narratives, a recurrent theme of longing for purpose and a quest for meaning emerges, intertwining with the textual landscapes of dystopias and utopias prevalent in science fiction literature. The chapter explores how dystopias embody the lost Axis Mundi, a profound reflection of humanity's existential disarray, while utopias attempt to resurrect this cosmic anchor to re-infuse purpose and meaning into human existence. Ernest Cline's novel, a literary endeavour steeped in archetypal symbolism, emerges as a remarkable illustration of this endeavour. Its narrative is a rich tapestry of archetypes, which are fundamental, universal themes and entities recognised across cultural and psychological spectra, inherited from the ancient reservoir of the collective unconscious and a concept robustly expanded upon by Carl Jung post his ideological divergence from

Freud. Brief expositions into common archetypes such as The Hero, The Mentor, and The Quest provide a deeper understanding of the narrative dynamics in Cline's novel, especially its overarching quest motif aimed at rediscovering the Axis Mundi. This archetype, symbolic of a centre, holds a mirror to the character's and, by extension, humanity's yearning for a solid foundation in a world devoid of inherent meaning. This chapter not only elaborates on the symbiotic relationship between technology and the postmodern ethos but also ventures into a cross-disciplinary dialogue between ludology and literary studies, employing ludological insights as complementary instruments to enrich our literary interpretations.

In the concluding chapter, an in-depth analysis of *Ready Player One* is embarked upon, employing the prism of archetypal theory alongside psychoanalytical scrutiny. A diligent examination of character archetypes, illustrated with nuanced examples from the narrative, enriches the analytical discourse. Central to this exploration is the Axis Mundi archetype, its resonance amplified against the backdrop of a postmodern society increasingly enmeshed in the tendrils of hyperreality, as delineated by Baudrillard. As reality's contours blur, the Axis Mundi emerges as a metaphorical lodestar, its celestial orientation offering a semblance of hope amidst the unyielding march of hyperreal simulations. Within the digital expanses of *Ready Player One*, the OASIS metamorphoses into a virtual Axis Mundi, encapsulating both a sanctuary and a gateway. It epitomizes a collective yearning for a transcendent truth amidst a reality overlaid with digital veneers. Through an intricate analysis of character archetypes and their manifestations within the narrative framework, the depth of the human endeavour to seek an authentic reality, even within the boundless, immersive simulations, is vividly elucidated.

In navigating through the intricate narrative of *Ready Player One*, this descriptive qualitative research employs the analytical tools of Jungian theory and postmodern philosophy. The overarching aim of this scholarly endeavour is to scrutinize the human pursuit of self-actualization and a nuanced understanding of reality amidst the engulfing waves of postmodern illusions. This study concludes by emphasizing our intent to shed light on the significance of the Axis Mundi in the dystopic reality contrasted against the utopian creation within the OASIS world as portrayed in the novel. To fulfil this aim, we will utilize Jungian archetypal methods, delineating how The Quest for the Axis Mundi in the narrative reflects humanity's struggle with a loss of purpose and meaning. By elucidating the symbolism and metaphors embedded within the text, this research strives

not only to contribute fresh insights into the broader academic dialogue but also to underscore the profound human endeavour to seek truth and understanding in a contemporary era besieged by hyper-reality and virtual existence. Through a close exploration of character archetypes and their emblematic representations, we aim to enrich the field with a more profound comprehension of the complex interplay between dystopic reality and the utopian OASIS world in reflecting the contemporary human condition.

CHAPTER I

TOWARDS A DECENTRALIZED WORLD

1.1.Lost in the Modern Chaos

Transitioning towards a decentralized world underscores a significant metamorphosis in the human societal construct, a reflection of the complex interplay of socio-political, cultural, and psychological dynamics that frame our modern condition. Traditionally, societies were organized around central focal points such as town squares, religious institutions, or communal gatherings. These entities served not merely as physical congregations but as symbolic epicentres of collective meaning and shared ideologies, offering individuals a collective sense of belonging and purpose. For instance, Emile Durkheim, in his seminal work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), elucidates the centrality of communal institutions and gatherings in traditional societies. He posits that religious rituals and communal gatherings foster a collective conscience, engendering a shared sense of belonging and purpose among individuals. The central focal points, be they town squares or religious institutions, not only serve as physical congregations but also as symbolic epicentres of collective meaning and shared ideologies.

However, from the late 19th to the 20th century, industrialization coupled with burgeoning technological advancements began to erode the gravitational pull of these traditional centres. This triggered a fragmentation, not as a fleeting psychological discord, but as a profound existential crisis indicative of the socio-political and cultural schisms burgeoning within modern society. The shift aligns with Roy Baumeister's assertion that the hallmark of individuality, so inherent in modern cultures, was conspicuously absent in premodern societies. According to Baumeister, the notion that each person harbours a unique character and holds specific potentialities was foreign to premodern cultures. This perspective resonates with Durkheim's analysis, which suggests that the 'individual,' as understood today, was an alien concept in traditional cultures, and individuality was not a prized attribute. It was the advent of modern societies and the nuanced differentiation in the division of labour that thrust the discrete individual into the spotlight (Giddens, 1991: 74-75).

The narrative of industrialization and urbanization substantially reconfigured societal landscapes, fostering a profound sense of alienation among individuals. The

archetypal village community, once the crucible of shared values and collective identities, gradually succumbed to urban anonymity, undermining the edifice of communal solidarity. This phenomenon is aptly articulated in *The Communist Manifesto*, which states, “constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social relations, everlasting uncertainty, and agitation, distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier times. All fixed, fast-frozen relationships, with their train of venerable ideas and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become obsolete before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are forced to face with sober sense the real conditions of their lives and their relations with their fellow men” (Marx and Engels, 1952: 25).

The phrase: “with urbanization, the big get bigger, the small also get more numerous” encapsulates the transition towards urbanized living succinctly (Jacobs, 1961: 148). The burgeoning urban landscapes epitomize external fragmentation, a dissonance mirrored internally as the psychological self splinters into numerous disjointed facets, each grappling for coherence amidst the whirlwind of modernity. For instance, the evolution of global communication tools, from telegraphs to the internet, transformed local communities into nodes within expansive global networks, detaching individuals from their localized contexts. Platforms like Facebook or Twitter, while facilitating global interactions, often do so at the expense of local community engagements.

This progressive detachment from traditional anchors of identity and the concomitant drift towards an increasingly abstract reality propels humanity on a tumultuous voyage. Urbanization is emblematic of this trend, as vast swathes of people transition from rural to urban settings, confronting alienation within the crowded yet impersonal megacities.

Extricated from shared local histories or communal narratives, modern individuals find themselves enmeshed in a kaleidoscope of roles, identities, and affiliations. This pervasive discord resonates through both the psychological and societal fabric, manifesting as a state of fragmented self-identity. A modern individual, for instance, may don multiple hats - as a digital nomad, a vegan, a gamer, and a yoga enthusiast - identities that perhaps would not have coexisted harmoniously in traditional societies. This multiplicity, albeit providing diverse avenues for self-expression, often engenders a sense

of fragmentation as individuals strive to find coherence amidst the competing narratives of a decentralized world.

The literary world too, mirrors this contemporary phenomenon of fragmentation and decentralization. Lauren Groff, in her novel *Arcadia*, captures the essence of this modern struggle through the lens of poetry. She notes, “Poetry is what he turns to these days, finding in its fragmentation the proper echo of the disintegrating world” (Groff, 2012: 358). This reflection aptly encapsulates how individuals are resorting to fragmented forms of expression, such as poetry, as a means to navigate and make sense of the increasingly decentralized and fragmented world they find themselves in.

In navigating the decentralized terrain, the modern individual grapples with the disintegration of erstwhile centralized societal structures, veering towards a fragmented self and community. This seismic shift towards decentralization and fragmentation, while disruptive, also heralds the emergence of a nuanced, multifaceted societal tapestry where the interplay between the individual and the collective takes on new dimensions in the contemporary discourse.

1.2. Inside the World of the Individual

With the emergence of the idea of the ‘individual,’ the inner world of man became the focus of science and that is how psychoanalysis became popular in the 20th century as a reaction to the chaos offered by the modern world and it slowly gained respect as a serious scientific branch. Psychoanalysis dives into the intricate labyrinth of the human mind and offers a captivating perspective. It beckons us to explore the enigmatic interplay between the conscious and the subconscious, unravelling the hidden threads that shape our experiences and perceptions. Psychoanalysis emerged as a beacon of hope amidst a sea of existential disquiet. It promised a voyage into the depths of the human psyche, an exploration aimed at bridging the chasm between the conscious and unconscious realms, attempting to restore a sense of cohesion, and meaning in a world seemingly adrift in a storm of relentless change and superficiality. Through the psychoanalytic lens, The Quest was embarked upon to heal and explore the human mind, to mend the fragments of modern human consciousness into a coherent narrative, capable of navigating the complex terrains of a decentralized world. This ambitious endeavour reflects a profound human longing for coherence and authenticity amidst the shifting sands of modern existence, a longing that continues to resonate through the annals of psychoanalytic

thought and practice. While some may argue about the limitations of psychoanalytic theory, it undeniably holds a profound significance in our quest to decipher the complex tapestry of human existence.

Pioneers of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, search through this labyrinth of fragmented consciousness, unravelling the intricacies of what they termed the 'hypnoid state,' or in other words, a split of consciousness (Breuer and Freud, 1957: 12). Their exploration was akin to venturing into a psychological abyss, attempting to illuminate the dark recesses of the mind veiled in layers of unconscious material. With the help of psychoanalysis as a tool, they sought to chart a course through the tumultuous seas of human consciousness, endeavouring to reconcile the fragmented self with the stark realities of modern existence.

The emergence of psychoanalysis was not merely a scientific endeavour but an urgent response to the healing cry of a generation adrift in the tempest of modernity. Freud and Breuer's identification of the hypnoid state highlighted a crucial juncture in the human endeavour to understand and mend the shattered mirror of self-identity. The psychoanalytic voyage was not only about healing individuals but also about exploring the mysteries of the collective human psyche amidst the dizzying pace of modern transformation.

In the hypnoid state, the coherent narrative of self-experience shatters into disjointed vignettes, each struggling for acknowledgement and integration. For example, a person embroiled in the demands of modern-day corporate culture might find themselves estranged from their inner emotional world, the incessant drive for achievement overshadowing the whisperings of the soul. This state of self-alienation reflects a broader societal narrative, a relentless march towards progress at the expense of inner harmony and existential coherence.

In this intellectual journey, it is imperative to pay homage to the trailblazing work of Joseph Breuer, a figure whose pioneering efforts paved the way for the emergence of psychoanalysis as we know it today. Breuer's relentless exploration of the enigmatic realm of the unconscious, coupled with his innovative therapeutic approaches, laid a sturdy foundation. This foundation, upon which luminaries like Sigmund Freud and a legion of psychoanalytic scholars would later build, became the crucible of groundbreaking insights and the birthplace of psychoanalytic theory itself.

The early beginnings of psychoanalysis are often associated with Sigmund Freud and his initial works. However, in the first lecture of *Five Lectures on Psycho-analysis*, Freud himself refutes this notion. He acknowledges that the credit for the inception of psychoanalysis does not belong to him, but rather to another Viennese physician, Dr. Josef Breuer. In 1880-2, Dr. Breuer applied psychoanalytic techniques to a young girl named Anna O., who was suffering from hysteria. Freud sheds light on the matter as follows:

“If it is a merit to have brought psycho-analysis into being that merit is not mine. I had no share in its earliest beginnings. I was a student and working for my final examinations at the time when another Viennese physician, Dr Josef Breuer, first (in 1880-2) made use of this procedure on a girl who was suffering from hysteria. Let us turn our attention straightaway to the history of this case and its treatment, which you will find set out in detail in the *Studies on Hysteria* which were published later by Breuer and myself” (Freud, 1909: 2199).

Anna O., whose real name was Bertha Pappenheim, holds a significant place in the history of psychoanalysis for it was her case that first exemplified the phenomenon of having dual consciousness, or a tendency toward dissociation, which is a characteristic feature of hysteria. Breuer referred to this as the hypnoid state, which represents the surfacing of abnormal states of consciousness and serves as a fundamental aspect of this neurosis (Breuer and Freud, 1957: 12). Breuer defined hysteria as a condition characterized by excessive and uncontrollable emotions. Although it is a controversial topic whether the treatment of Pappenheim was a success or not, it is clear that the case contributed to the science of psychoanalysis and led to the emergence of the concept of the hypnoid state, which gained more meaning with the fragmentations of the human mind and soul with the decentred and chaotic structure of the postmodern world that stands against reality as people used to know.

1.3.The Fluidlike Reality

In the transition to the 20th century, the contours of societal reality began to shift, heralding a slow descent into what can be perceived as a dystopian state. The proclamation of postmodernism accentuated this transformation, declaring the world to be decentred, thus evoking a profound disorientation among individuals. This transition from Modernism to Postmodernism presents a stark divergence in perspectives on the nature of authorship, interpretation, and reality itself. For instance, in literature where Modernism tends to emphasize grand narratives, objective truths, and the importance of

the author's intentions, Postmodernism breaks away from these notions, advocating for a multiplicity of meanings, the subjectivity of truths, and the dissolution of authorial intent as the sole determinant of textual interpretation.

Roland Barthes' landmark essay *Death of the Author* articulates the postmodern stance on authorship. In this essay, Barthes argues that the act of reading, rather than the author's intent, creates meaning (Barthes 1967: 142-148). This concept complements Jacques Derrida's definition of 'difference,' which proposes that meaning is not fixed but deferred, constructed through a variety of interpretations (Derrida, 1967).

This conceptual decentralization disrupted the traditional notions of a coherent, ordered existence, represented symbolically through the Jungian concept of the Axis Mundi which will be evaluated in the next chapter. In traditional thought, the Axis Mundi served as a focal point, a stable anchor within the cosmos around which the human understanding of reality pivoted. However, as the postmodern lens defocused this central axis, individuals found themselves adrift in an ever-expanding sea of relativistic interpretations and reality configurations.

In addition to the disquiet fostered by the absence of a central axis, the phenomenon of hyperreality, as delineated by Jean Baudrillard, further obscured the once clear demarcation between reality and illusion. His work *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) contends that society has progressed from a condition where simulations or simulacra imitate an underlying reality to a phase where they have substituted reality altogether. Baudrillard's exploration of hyperreality unveils a contemporary landscape where simulations do not merely reflect, but precede and determine the real, creating a scenario where the authentic is overshadowed by the artificial. This landscape is strewn with simulacra, copies without originals, which contribute to the erosion of a collective sense of a unified, tangible reality. As the notion of 'hyperreality' is a state where the line between the real and the simulated becomes increasingly blurred, in our tech-driven world, representations often supersede the things they represent, leading to what Baudrillard calls a hyperreal condition. Baudrillard elaborates on four stages of the image in his analysis. In the first stage, the image is a clear reflection of reality. In the second, it distorts that reality. In the third, the image masks the absence of reality. Finally, in the fourth stage, the image has no relation to any reality whatsoever; it becomes a pure simulation. It is in this fourth stage that society currently finds itself, according to

Baudrillard. Here, historical events, identities, and even our sense of time and space are being replaced by a continuous stream of simulations, further contributing to the demise of any universally shared reality (Baudrillard, 1994: 23).

The collective detachment from a recognisable 'central axis' coupled with the enveloping veneer of hyperreality, cultivates a scenario akin to a dystopia. This dystopic veil does not merely shroud the physical or social realms but extends its cold grasp to the very psyche of the modern individual, fragmenting the once solid scaffold of reality into myriad shards of plausible truths. This scenario, where individuals find themselves on a ceaseless quest for a lost centre amidst a kaleidoscope of hyperreal simulations, encapsulates the enigmatic struggle between the real and the unreal that hallmark the 20th century's philosophical and existential milieu.

The implications of Baudrillard's hyperreality are profound for understanding the postmodern world and, by extension, the Axis Mundi archetype in *Ready Player One*. In a society inundated with simulations and simulacra, the search for a true, unifying centre—be it a geographic location, a sense of self, or a guiding narrative—becomes both futile and paradoxical. Just as the players in the OASIS seek an elusive 'reality' through their avatars and quests, contemporary individuals seek a centre, an Axis Mundi, in a world that Baudrillard would argue is devoid of any. The axis has become not merely a simulated centre but a hyperreal one.

In today's postmodern society, technology serves as both a liberator and a disruptor, facilitating unprecedented connectivity while also engendering a sense of detachment from reality. With the rise of digital technology, particularly social media, and virtual reality platforms, we find ourselves navigating a complex landscape where our experiences, perceptions, and even identities are mediated by screens and algorithms. Manuel Castells, in *The Rise of the Network Society* (Castells, 1996) argues that our transformation from a material-based to an information-based society has led to digital networks taking precedence over the physical world, sometimes seeming more 'real' than tangible interactions.

This transition to an information-centric paradigm has profound psychological implications. Social media allows individuals to create digital avatars, extensions of themselves that exist in the virtual realm. While these avatars are initially intended to represent the Self, they can eventually become dissociated entities altogether, leading to

what could be described as a split in consciousness. Virtual reality takes this disconnection a step further. No longer merely a reflection of reality, these immersive environments become substitutes for it. This echoes Jean Baudrillard's theory of 'hyperreality,' a condition where the boundary between the 'real' and the 'simulation' becomes increasingly indistinct.

Yet, the influence of technology on our postmodern existence is not limited to the blurring of boundaries between the real and the virtual. It also leads to the erosion of the category of the 'real' itself. Sherry Turkle, in her seminal work *Life on the Screen*, argues that the distinction between the virtual and the real is not just fading but is actively being redefined (Turkle, 1995). In this redefinition, the notion of an anchoring centre, an Axis Mundi, becomes more elusive, yet paradoxically, more sought-after. As reality becomes a shifting construct mediated by technology, individuals find themselves adrift, longing for a stabilizing core.

Therefore, the technological mediation of reality impacts our engagement with archetypes like the Axis Mundi, traditionally considered a fixed centre in a coherent universe. The Axis Mundi in a postmodern context is no longer just a physical or metaphysical point of convergence but is subject to the fluid and often contradictory realities that technology engenders. The search for this unifying centre, or Axis Mundi, in a world of shifting realities, becomes a complex endeavour, one that mirrors our collective struggle for meaning, identity, and stability in a fragmented world.

As we mingle with the complexities of the digital age, our collective estrangement from a stable, shared reality continues to grow. Technology, by offering alternative, often preferable realities while simultaneously mediating our experience of the physical world, amplifies the postmodern condition of a 'loss of the real.' This has profound implications for our understanding of archetypes like the Axis Mundi, complicating our quest for a stable centre in a universe that technology has rendered increasingly fragmented. At this point, the advent of ludology—the study of games, particularly video games—offers a critical lens through which to examine our evolving relationship with technology and the postmodern condition. Ludology posits games as systems defined by rules, player interaction, and the resulting experiences, making it an ideal framework for exploring the multi-layered realities created by digital technology.

In the context of our study, which primarily focuses on Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One*, ludology intersects significantly with the themes of simulation, hyperreality, and archetypes like the Axis Mundi. The novel's primary setting, the OASIS, is a sprawling virtual universe that serves both as a game and a socio-cultural hub. It epitomizes what Baudrillard would describe as 'hyperreality'—a simulation so compelling that it effectively replaces the 'real world' for its inhabitants. The OASIS is not just a game; for many, it is the primary plane of existence, a testament to the pervasive and compelling nature of hyperreal simulations.

What makes this even more fascinating is the OASIS's role as a modern Axis Mundi—a virtual centre of the universe where individuals come not just to escape but also to search for meaning and even enlightenment. It serves as a contemporary representation of this age-old archetype, except that now, this cosmic centre is a digital, hyperreal space, sculpted by code and mediated by technology.

Furthermore, the mechanics of the OASIS highlight another crucial point of discussion in ludology: the role of player agency and interactivity. While traditional narratives often depict a fixed set of events and outcomes, interactive digital environments like the OASIS are fluid, and contingent on player choices. This dynamic nature, which allows for multiple branching pathways and interpretations, underscores the postmodernist themes of subjectivity and relativism. It also aligns with the idea that in the realm of hyperreality, meaning becomes decentralized, multifaceted, and ever-changing.

Thus, ludology provides an invaluable framework for examining the complexities of life in the digital age, particularly the ways in which technology mediates our experiences, our relationships with archetypal concepts like the Axis Mundi, and our pursuit of meaning in a postmodern world increasingly defined by simulated realities. As we find ourselves immersed in ever more compelling layers of virtual worlds, the study of games and gameplay becomes not just an academic endeavour but a critical tool for understanding our shifting realities and selves.

In summary, Baudrillard's theory finds echoes in the depiction of the OASIS in *Ready Player One*, offering a new layer of complexity to the understanding of the Axis Mundi. Here, the Axis Mundi is not just a physical or spiritual centre but can also be a simulated one, converging the boundaries between the virtual and the real. This speaks to

the thesis's overarching claim that individual microcosms are increasingly reflected in the larger macrocosm of a postmodern reality.

CHAPTER II

LONGING FOR A PURPOSE, LOOKING FOR A MEANING

2.1. Dystopias vs. Utopias

The nexus between dystopia and science fiction forms a riveting domain in literature, providing a canvas upon which authors can project both the potential and the peril inherent in human advancement and societal evolution. The term ‘dustopia,’ the original form of ‘dystopia,’ was initially introduced in Lewis Henry Young’s work, *Utopia: or Apollo’s Golden Days* in 1747 (Young, 1747). Furthermore, John Stuart Mill used ‘dystopia’ as the opposite of ‘utopia’ in one of his Parliamentary Speeches from 1868 by adding the prefix ‘dys’ (Mill, 1988: 248). Dystopia refers to an imagined society marked by oppression, suffering, and a dehumanizing atmosphere. In dystopian narratives there are five main elements, ‘government control’ is a central element, portraying extremes in governmental rule, from oppressive totalitarianism to violent anarchy. These societies often exist in apocalyptic environments, the result of ‘environmental destruction’ caused by war and weaponry. Additionally, dystopian works explore ‘the consequences of unchecked technological advancements,’ illustrating advancements that grow beyond human control and become domineering and fear-inducing. Within these harsh societal structures, characters are left to their own devices for ‘survival,’ emphasizing their resilience and adaptability. Moreover, dystopian literature emphasizes the needs of society and conformity at the expense of individual freedom and expression, highlighting ‘the loss of personal identity’ and creativity in the face of collective uniformity. Dystopian narratives, characterized by grim, oppressive societies often arising from the ashes of lofty utopian aspirations, often criticize contemporary social, political, and technological trends. On the other hand, science fiction, with its speculative ethos, ventures into the realms of the possible, exploring the yet-to-be-realized vistas of human and technological potential. The science fiction genre attempts to reconcile elements of real life and the unknown within a philosophical and metaphysical framework, often adopting either a simplistic or a complex approach. Ballard states that:

“We live in a world ruled by fictions of every kind — mass merchandising, advertising, politics conducted as a branch of advertising, the instant translation of science and technology into popular imagery, the increasing blurring and intermingling of identities within the realm of consumer goods, the pre-empting of any free or original imaginative response to experience by the television screen. We live inside an enormous novel. For the writer in particular it is less and less necessary for him to invent the fictional

content of his novel. The fiction is already there. The writer's task is to invent the reality." (Ballard, 1974: 2)

Ballard further argues that understanding the present is best achieved through exploring the future rather than dwelling on the past. Making predictions and assumptions about the future imbues life with excitement and purpose, prompting profound questions about human survival, the creation of unconventional life forms for personal benefit, and the impact of dehumanized societies resulting from postmodernist dystopias. These inquiries closely search the fundamental aspects of existence, challenging individuals to contemplate their essence and connection to life.

In blending these genres, a rich tradition of dystopian science fiction emerges, offering tales that are both cautionary and visionary. Through the speculative lens of science fiction, dystopian narratives extrapolate current trajectories to unveil a future fraught with existential threats, social decay, and ethical quagmires.

Iconic exemplars of this interplay are manifold in literary history. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) unfurls a future where human emotion and free will are subjugated to state-controlled genetic and psychological conditioning. George Orwell's *1984* (1949) envisages a totalitarian regime of surveillance and thought control. Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) explores a society where books are banned, and 'firemen' burn any that are found. In a more contemporary scope, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) depicts a theocratic and patriarchal society following an environmental catastrophe, while Suzanne Collins' the *Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010) portrays a starkly divided society bound by a brutal, televised gladiatorial contest.

These narratives, among others, harness the speculative potency of science fiction to explore dystopian themes, elucidating the potential fallout of unchecked technological advancements, political tyranny, and social disintegration. They invite readers to traverse the shadowed corridors of 'what-if' scenarios, offering both a reflection on present conditions and a speculative glance into the potential dire outcomes of current trends. In totality, the intersection of dystopia and science fiction serves not merely as a narrative tradition but as a critical endeavour, probing the ethical, social, and existential dimensions of the human condition amidst rapid technological and societal evolution.

On the other hand, literature also presents us with utopian visions where the exploration of idealized societies reflects a longing or quest for purpose and meaning,

often symbolized through the re-establishment or search for a central unifying element akin to the Axis Mundi. Utopian narratives stretch the boundaries of imagination to propose alternative, harmonized societal constructs. Classic examples include Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), which delineates an egalitarian society on an island, and Aldous Huxley's *Island* (1962), which envisions a society with a holistic approach to human existence.

Ernest Cline's novel *Ready Player One* intriguingly dovetails into this tradition, yet with a modern, technologically mediated twist. The novel invites readers into a near-future dystopian world where individuals escape their grim reality by immersing themselves in a virtual utopia known as the OASIS. This virtual realm is not merely a flight of fancy; it manifests as a crucible of cultural archetypes, reflecting a collective yearning for purpose and a central axis of meaning amid the chaos of the external world.

Ready Player One is not just a narrative but a dense tapestry woven with archetypes. The novel's universe is in a relentless quest for the Axis Mundi - a core around which individuals' lives could pivot, reinstating a sense of purpose and direction hitherto lost in the tumult of a disoriented modern world. The myriad references to popular culture, mythologies, and historical narratives within the OASIS symbolize a search for a common cultural lexicon, a shared Axis Mundi, that could potentially bind the fragmented postmodern consciousness into a coherent whole.

This novel presents a blend of utopian aspiration and archetypal imagery as a response to the contemporary human endeavour in seeking purpose and meaning. The characters' journey through the labyrinth of the virtual world to uncover the Easter Egg is emblematic of a deeper, almost mythological quest. It echoes a societal urge to rediscover a central anchoring point, an Axis Mundi, around which the Self and the community could orientate, thus regaining a semblance of meaning amidst the prevailing existential dissonance. Through the story, Cline articulates a narrative where the realm of the virtual becomes a medium to navigate the complex interplay between dystopian realities and utopian aspirations, reflecting a contemporary struggle to retrieve a lost sense of centrality and purpose in a rapidly evolving, decentred world.

2.2. Into the Labyrinth of the Human Mind

To fathom the depths of archetypes, one must embark on a captivating journey tracing the intricate narrative of their evolution and the enigmatic realms from which they emerged. Let us first embark upon an intellectual odyssey commencing with the profound insights of Sigmund Freud to have a closer look at the personality concepts suggested by him. It is within the contours of Freud's pioneering theories that we find the fertile ground from which Carl Jung, in his wisdom, either derived inspiration or refined his own ideas.

In Freud's framework, the 'id' serves as the repository for our most primitive urges and desires, operating solely on the pleasure principle. This aspect of the unconscious mind is fundamentally impulsive, prioritizing immediate gratification without concern for reality or moral implications. The Id is not guided by logic or ethical considerations but rather acts as the instinctual drive behind human behaviour. Freud believed that some individuals may be predominantly guided by their id, leading them to make choices solely based on immediate needs without considering long-term consequences.

Freud used the metaphor of a "horse and a rider" to illustrate the relationship between the Id and the Ego (Freud, 1923: 15). In this analogy, the Id is likened to a horse driven by instinctual forces, while the Ego serves as the rider who attempts to steer and manage these impulses. Although the Ego aims to control the Id, the interaction between the two is often shaped by the Ego's own set of desires and motivations.

Two primary biological instincts make up the Id: 'Eros,' which is the life-affirming, creative force, and 'Thanatos,' the destructive, death-oriented drive. As Freud states in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, it is "[...] the antithesis between the life and death instincts our point of departure. Object-love itself displays a second such polarity, that of love (tenderness) and hate (aggression)" (Freud, 1920: 53). These dual aspects of the Id contribute to its complex role in human psychology, motivating actions that range from creation to destruction.

In human psychology, according to Freud, the 'Ego' plays a crucial role in mediating between the pursuit of pleasure and the constraints of reality. The Ego understands that it is impractical to fulfil every whim and craving generated by the Id. While the Ego itself is not inherently ethical, it operates under the 'reality principle,' navigating between the Id's unchecked urges and the limitations imposed by the real world.

Serving as the individual's sense of Self, the Ego is a complex structure partially rooted in unconscious desires. Yet it also accounts for social, ethical, and cultural norms to help manage the raw, instinctive impulses originating from the Id. Despite both the Id and Ego being largely unconscious entities, the Ego maintains a more direct interaction with our sensory perceptions.

One of the Ego's core functions is self-preservation, equipping it with the capability to rein in the Id's more primal demands. This balancing act enables the Ego to integrate instinctual needs with practical and ethical considerations, thereby facilitating more adaptive behaviour:

“The Ego is first and foremost a bodily Ego; it is not merely a surface entity but is itself the projection of a surface. If we wish to find an anatomical analogy for it, we can best identify it with the ‘cortical homunculus’ of the anatomists, which stands on its head in the cortex, sticks up its heels, faces backwards and, as we know, has its speech-area on the left-hand side. The Ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body. It may thus be regarded as a mental projection of the surface of the body, representing the superficies of the mental apparatus.” (Freud, 1923: 26)

Freud posited that the ‘Superego’ emerges in the developmental stage around ages four or five, serving as the repository for societal norms and ethical codes. It acts essentially as the mental ‘moral compass’, enabling the individual to temper impulses that are socially or ethically unacceptable. In the absence of the Superego, Freud theorized that individuals would be prone to acts of aggression and various forms of unethical behaviour, lacking the cognitive mechanism to differentiate between right and wrong.

Functioning as the ethical core of one's personality, the Superego has the authority to subdue the raw impulses emanating from the id. Freud categorized the Superego into two distinct components: the conscience and the ideal Self. The conscience serves as the internalized ethical standards and values that society upholds, helping individuals refrain from indulging in socially unacceptable desires. The ideal Self, on the other hand, reflects the aspirational image of how one should conduct oneself in accordance with societal expectations.

The psychoanalytic framework zeroes in on elucidating the influence of the subconscious on manifest cognitive functions, which may function as barriers to optimal psychological health. This paradigm is anchored in the notion that innate, biological forces—largely formed during the initial stages of life when attempting to fulfil

fundamental needs—steer human actions, all while remaining elusive to conscious awareness (Pick, 2015). Through its investigative methods, psychoanalysis probes into the adult defence systems that protect against unrecognized, but deeply rooted desires that trace back to these early life experiences, highlighting their centrality in the constitution of adult psychological well-being (Frosh, 2016).

Although Freud's research is valuable, he had an individualistic approach to the subconscious. That is to say; his work on the subconscious mainly focused on individual experiences and emotions, rather than considering collective or societal aspects. However, despite the increasing emphasis of the modern age on the individuality of man, human beings are still a part of their community and the human race on a larger scale. So, it may not be sufficient to evaluate human beings' inner worlds in isolation but their interactions with one another should also be taken into account.

Carl Gustav Jung, renowned as the pioneer of analytical psychology, made significant contributions to the field of psychology and had initially worked in close collaboration with Sigmund Freud. However, their professional relationship eventually diverged, leading Jung to develop his own unique approach to psychology, known as analytical psychology.

In 1912, Jung published his groundbreaking work titled *The Psychology of the Unconscious* (Jung, 1912). This marked a significant departure from Freud's psychoanalytic theories. While Freud's model of the mind primarily consisted of two layers, the conscious and the unconscious, Jung introduced a more comprehensive and expansive perspective. Jung proposed that the unconscious mind was not solely composed of repressed personal experiences, as suggested by Freud. Instead, he believed that it also contained elements that were common to all of humanity. In this context, Jung introduced the concept of the 'collective unconscious.' This collective unconscious represents a shared reservoir of universal human experiences, symbols, and archetypes that are present in the psyches of all individuals.

As clearly expressed, one of the most distinct aspects that sets Jung apart from Freud is his concept of a collective or transpersonal unconscious. This element of Jung's theory is perhaps his most groundbreaking and contentious idea in the realm of personality psychology. According to him, the collective unconscious acts as a reservoir for universal cognitive structures often referred to as archetypes, which are common to

all humans. These inherited mental frameworks manifest themselves universally, evident in various cultures through art, literature, and dream symbolism. According to Jung, “the form of the world into which (a person) is born is already inborn in him, as a virtual image” (Jung, 1953: 188) and he describes the archetypes as follows:

“The contents of the personal unconscious are chiefly the feeling-toned complexes, as they are called; they constitute the personal and private side of psychic life. The contents of the collective unconscious, on the other hand, are known as Archetypes” (Jung, 1959: 4).

While explaining the nature of the archetypes, Jung proposes that evolutionary factors have left a lasting imprint on the human psyche, creating universal predispositions in individuals. Specific phobias such as the fear of darkness, or of certain animals like snakes or spiders, serve as examples. Interestingly, these ideas find contemporary validation in the concept of prepared conditioning (Seligman, 1971). However, for Jung, “The collective unconscious is a deeper layer which does not rest upon the personal unconscious or which is not a personal acquisition, but which is inborn and universal, and which has contents and modes of behaviour that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals” (Erten, 2008: 2).

In Carl Jung’s psychological framework, the notion of the collective unconscious occupies a central and significant role, distinguishing his ideas from other psychological theories of his time. This collective unconscious is not to be confused with the personal unconscious, which is shaped and influenced by the experiences, traumas, and memories unique to each individual. In contrast, the collective unconscious is a ubiquitous, intangible psychic space that is shared among all humans, independent of their personal histories. It serves as a repository for archetypes—universal, foundational templates that guide human perception, behaviour, and emotional response. Jung explains the difference as follows:

“Personal unconscious rests upon a deeper layer, which does not derive from personal experience and is not a personal acquisition but is inborn. This deeper layer I call the collective unconscious. I have chosen the term “collective” because this part of the unconscious is not individual but universal; in contrast to the personal psyche; it has contents and modes of behaviour that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals. It is, in other words, identical in all men and thus constitutes a common psychic substrate of a suprapersonal nature which is present in every one of us” (Jung, 1959: 3-4).

The collective unconscious, according to Jung, is an innate component of the human psyche, present from birth. It does not evolve or develop through personal experience;

rather, it exists as a constant, underlying layer of the human mind. This dimension serves as the wellspring of universally shared psychic content, containing archetypes that steer our reactions to a myriad of life experiences and shape the ways we engage with the world around us. Even though these archetypal patterns find expression in myths, folklore, religious traditions, and cultural rituals, the collective unconscious itself remains fundamentally elusive and beyond the reach of direct human experience:

“From the unconscious there emanate determining influences which, independently of tradition, guarantee in every single individual a similarity and even a sameness of experience, and also of the way it is represented imaginatively. One of the main proofs of this is the almost universal parallelism between mythological motifs, which, on account of their quality as primordial images, I have called archetypes” (Jung, 1959: 58).

Jung’s concept of the collective unconscious serves as a unifying substrate that bridges individual psychological experiences with a broader, universal human narrative. By positing this shared psychic realm, he integrates the idiosyncratic and the universal, arguing that individual human behaviour is influenced not just by personal history but also by a set of pre-existing psychic structures. These archetypes, whether they be figures like ‘The Mother,’ ‘The Hero,’ or ‘The Wise Old Man,’ or themes such as birth, death, and rebirth, some of which will be evaluated in the following sections, guide our interactions and emotional responses throughout our lives. They exist as predilections in the psyche, steering us toward certain modes of understanding and interaction.

In this way, the collective unconscious acts as a form of psychological inheritance, granting each individual access to a set of mental and emotional patterns that have been shared across generations and cultures. These patterns, or archetypes, serve as psychic catalysts that can spur individual and collective psychological development. However, it is important to note that the collective unconscious is not a static entity; it also offers a dynamic influence, capable of inspiring individual growth and transformation by bringing these deep-seated archetypes into conscious awareness.

Therefore, understanding the role of the collective unconscious becomes crucial in grasping the full scope of human psychology. It offers a nuanced perspective that transcends individual experiences, linking them to universal structures that have been embedded in the human psyche over countless generations. Jung’s collective unconscious thus serves as both a historical archive and a guiding force, deeply influencing how humans perceive, interact with, and are formed by the world they inhabit.

As previously emphasized, archetypes, a central concept in Jungian psychology, are fundamental elements within the collective unconscious. They are recurring symbols, themes, or motifs found in the myths, dreams, and stories of various cultures throughout history. Jung believed that archetypes played a crucial role in shaping human behaviour and understanding the origins of neurotic disorders. He explains their significance as follows:

“The archetype is an element of our psychic structure and thus a vital and necessary component in our psychic economy. It represents or personifies certain instinctive data of the dark, primitive psyche, the real but invisible roots of consciousness. Of what elementary importance the connection with these roots is, we see from the preoccupation of the primitive mentality with certain “magic” factors, which are nothing less than what we would call archetypes” (Jung, 1959: 160).

These archetypal symbols are deeply ingrained in the human psyche and transcend individual and cultural boundaries. They serve as a crucial mechanism for articulating the presence of a collective unconscious, which exists beyond Freud’s delineation of the personal unconscious. This deeper realm of the unconscious is expressed through universally recurrent motifs evident in phenomena like dreams, folklore, and religious tenets. Such archetypal patterns manifest in varied complexities—ranging from rudimentary forms in dreams to more intricate elaborations within myths and religious doctrines. The latter, notably in religious dogmas, are meticulously structured to facilitate indirect engagement with the unconscious while averting a direct confrontation. Since the decline of organized religion, specifically post the Protestant Reformation, humans have increasingly felt a void, necessitating a return to the unconscious for existential fulfilment.

This inward journey requires facing the ‘Shadow,’ representing one’s concealed aspects, as well as the ‘Anima’ or ‘Animus,’ symbolizing the latent qualities of the opposite sex within an individual. Beyond these lies what can be termed as the archetype of ultimate significance or purpose. These archetypes are subject to different levels of manifestation—from personification to situational depictions. While archetypes can be valuable constructs in normal cognitive functioning, an overpowering archetype could engender pathological states such as psychosis. The therapeutic intervention incorporates making these unconscious archetypes as conscious as possible, followed by their synthesis into the conscious mind via acknowledgement and acceptance. Due to modern humans’ elevated capacities for cognitive dissonance, the mere recognition of these

archetypes may not suffice for constructive action, necessitating ethical evaluation and guidance during the therapeutic process.

2.3. The Heritage of Humanity: The Collective Unconscious

As emphasized earlier, apart from the personal unconscious, a universally shared unconscious—termed the collective unconscious—is postulated to co-exist, constituting pre-configured cognitive frameworks or archetypes. These archetypes shape the psychic experiences that transition into conscious awareness. Serving as psychic instincts, these archetypes often correlate with ubiquitous ideas like rebirth, manifesting independently across diverse cultures and timelines, thus affirming the concept of a collective unconscious. Resistance to the expression of these archetypes could result in psychological distress or disorders. This theory finds empirical support in the examination of dreams across life stages, states of active imagination, delusional episodes, and hypnotic states, as exemplified by a case study focusing on the delusional system of a paranoid schizophrenic.

The concept of archetypes is framed as an empirically grounded construct akin to the atom in physical sciences. These archetypes, viewed as innate psychic patterns, are not mere reflections of physical processes but rather manifest within them. While materialist theories posit the psyche as a byproduct of brain chemistry, such an argument lacks definitive evidence, making it more plausible to consider psychic phenomena as originating rather than derivative factors. For instance, the ‘Anima,’ representing the feminine side of the universal male-female dichotomy, has found expression through various cultural lenses like mythology, philosophy, and theology. This archetype’s potent influence is attributed to a significant suppression of unconscious material linked to parental figures. Archetypal patterns are considered present from birth, shaping an individual’s conceptual landscape as they mature. Thus, the Anima archetype projects a divine-like quality onto the mother figure in early life before being subsumed back into the unconscious, influenced by the constraining forces of objective reality. In therapeutic contexts, the Anima is deemed pivotal for comprehending male psychological nuances. As Jung clearly states, “If the encounter with the Shadow is the “apprentice-piece” in the individual’s development, then that with the Anima is the “master-piece”” (Jung, 1959: 29).

In tracing the historical antecedents of the archetype concept, Plato's theory of the world of Ideas emerges as a precursor, positing an inherent predisposition that shapes cognitive experiences. Carl's unique contribution was his assertion that archetypes are not merely disseminated through social or cultural avenues but can manifest spontaneously. Importantly, an archetype is not fixed in its semantic content; it serves as a framework that can be instantiated in myriad forms, drawing parallels with biological instincts in this regard.

Jungian archetypes represent psychic imprints stemming from a shared collective unconscious giving them the possibility of making themselves visible across diverse cultures shaping human behaviour by echoing ancestral experiences for their source is the same collective repository. Jung identified multiple archetypes but devoted particular focus to the 'Self,' the 'Persona,' the 'Shadow,' and the 'Anima/Animus,' thereby offering a comprehensive understanding of the collective and individual psyche.

In Jungian psychology, the concept of the 'Self' holds a paramount position as it encompasses the entire psyche, including its latent and manifest faculties. Jung states that "as an individual phenomenon, the Self is "smaller than small;" as the equivalent of the cosmos, it is "bigger than big." The Self, regarded as the counter-pole of the world, its "absolutely other," is the sine qua non of all empirical knowledge and consciousness of subject and object" (Jung, 1959: 171). Unlike Freudian psychology, which primarily centres around the Ego, Jung's framework pivots on the Self as the orchestrating intelligence that steers individual development and overall well-being. This central psychic entity is not just a repository of an individual's lived experiences but also a proactive, future-oriented force. It guides individuals toward wholeness through a process Jung termed 'individuation,' which aims at unlocking the full range of human potentials.

The teleological, or purpose-driven, nature of the Self sets it apart in the study of psychology. While the Ego emerges as a component of the Self and remains an important aspect of consciousness, it is the Self that maintains the broader perspective. The Self is not just a byproduct of biological or personal history but acts as a conduit that taps into a vast reservoir of human experience—ranging from cultural, religious, to even archetypal dimensions stored in the collective unconscious.

This wide-ranging capability of the Self allows it to be often projected onto various powerful figures or institutions, be it deities, celestial bodies, or earthly rulers. Such

projections highlight the Self's multi-dimensional reach that extends beyond individual biology to engage with broader existential and metaphysical questions. Therefore, the Self is not merely an internal construct but a complex intersection of innate capabilities, personal experiences, and the collective wisdom of humanity.

The concept of the Self in Carl Jung's analytical psychology serves as a central axis for individuation and psychological integration. Jung posits that the Self is a unifying force within the psyche, embodying not just the conscious mind but also the unconscious. In Jungian terms, it is an archetype, a universal symbol or concept that provides a template for human thought and behaviour across cultures and eras. As an archetype, the Self can be seen as functioning somewhat like an *Axis Mundi* within individual psychology—a centre around which all other aspects of the psyche can orient themselves. This central axis is crucial for the process of individuation, where the individuals strive for wholeness by integrating various aspects of their psyche, including but not limited to, the Shadow, the Anima/Animus, and the Ego.

In this sense, the ultimate aim of the Self, according to Jung, is to achieve a state of wholeness or completeness. This is not just a static end state but a dynamic, ongoing process that navigates the complexities and challenges of each life stage. By pursuing individuation, individuals strive for a more balanced and integrated psyche, where disparate elements, including the Ego, the personal unconscious, and the collective unconscious, harmoniously coexist. In doing so, they fulfil the teleological aim of the Self, which is to enable each individual to live out their fullest potential, deeply influenced and enriched by the intricate tapestry of human experience and archetypal wisdom.

'The Persona' serves as a social facade or mask that an individual wears in order to adapt to societal norms or expectations. Originating from the Greek term for the masks used by actors, the Persona functions as a curated version of oneself that interacts with the external world. Jung identifies this archetype and states: "One could say, with a little exaggeration, that the Persona is that which in reality one is not, but which oneself as well as others think one is" (Jung, 1959: 123). Essentially, you could consider it the Ego's 'publicist', shaping the outward image while managing social interactions. A well-balanced Persona is instrumental for social functionality, capable of adjusting its presentation according to different contexts and situations.

However, problems arise when an individual becomes too closely aligned with or confined by their Persona. For instance, someone who is unable to shed their professional demeanour in personal settings—a teacher who patronizes adults as if they were young students, for example—may find themselves restricted by this singular aspect of their identity. While such a Persona might serve well in specific roles or settings, its overuse can lead to a neglect of other facets of the personality, leaving the individual psychologically underdeveloped:

“The Persona is a complicated system of relations between the individual consciousness and society, fittingly enough a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and, on the other, to conceal the true nature of the individual” (Jung, 1982: 81).

The development of the Persona is largely shaped during childhood and is influenced by the expectations and feedback of parents, teachers, and peers. As a result, the Persona often reflects socially desirable traits, while its opposite—what Jung referred to as the ‘Shadow’—harbours the less socially acceptable aspects of the individual’s personality. A successful Persona is flexible and transparent, acting as a genuine representation of the person’s Ego qualities while allowing room for the complexities of the entire Self to be acknowledged and expressed. Failing to achieve this balance can result in an impoverished sense of self, as the individual becomes trapped in a limited, one-dimensional identity.

‘The Shadow’ represents the hidden or less visible aspects of ourselves—those characteristics, impulses, or traits that we would rather not acknowledge or that we dislike. This element of our psychology resides mainly in our personal unconscious but is also connected to the collective unconscious. It is typically one of the more accessible complexes when we engage in introspective or conscious thinking. The Shadow often contains attributes that are in direct contrast to those presented by our Persona, reflecting Jung’s principle of psychological compensation: if there’s light that stands for conscious awareness, there must be also the Shadow which represents unconscious elements.

Culturally, the concept of the Shadow has captured our collective imagination, as seen in works like *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) or *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). These stories focus on the tension between socially acceptable behaviour and hidden darker impulses explained by Jung himself as follows:

“If the repressed tendencies – the Shadow, as I call them – were decidedly evil, there would be no problem whatever. But the Shadow is merely somewhat inferior, primitive, unadapted, and awkward; not wholly bad. It even contains inferior, childish, or primitive qualities which would in a way vitalize and embellish human existence.” (Jung, 1953: 22)

That is to say; the Shadow is not just a repository for negative qualities; it is also a critical component that adds depth and complexity to our personalities. If the Shadow is completely suppressed or ignored, the result can be a superficial personality overly concerned with social validation and lacking authentic depth:

“The meeting with oneself is, at first, the meeting with one’s own Shadow. The Shadow is a tight passage, a narrow door, whose painful constriction no one is spared who goes down to the deep well. But one must learn to know oneself in order to know who one is. For what comes after the door is, surprisingly enough, a boundless expanse full of unprecedented uncertainty, with apparently no inside and no outside, no above and no below, no here and no there, no mine and no thine, no good and no bad. It is the world of water, where all life floats in suspension; where the realm of the sympathetic system, the soul of everything living, begins; where I am indivisibly this and that; where I experience the other in myself and the other-than-myself experiences.” (Jung, 1959: 21-22)

Most often, we encounter our Shadows through projection, attributing traits we do not like in ourselves to other people. For example, the characteristics that irritate us the most in others are likely the very traits we refuse to recognize within ourselves. These are elements of our Shadow that we have disowned and externalized. The challenging but rewarding psychological work lies in ‘reclaiming’ these disowned parts, integrating them with our conscious self, and thereby achieving a more complete and balanced personality. This integration process allows for a more authentic existence, in which we are not constantly at odds with different aspects of ourselves.

The ‘Anima’ and ‘Animus’ archetypes are deeply fascinating yet often misunderstood elements of the personal unconscious. Jung explains them as “historically above all in the divine syzygies, the male-female pairs of deities” (Jung, 1959: 59). These contra sexual archetypes serve as symbolic representations of the feminine within men (Anima) and the masculine within women (Animus). They draw from broader archetypes of femininity and masculinity, but they are also shaped by an individual’s specific experiences with members of the opposite sex, beginning usually with one’s parents. These figures function as counterbalances, existing in the unconscious to offset the conscious mind’s tendencies toward one-sidedness related to gender. As Jung states:

“Every man carries within himself an eternal image of woman, not the image of this or that definite woman, but rather a definite feminine image. This image is fundamentally an unconscious, hereditary factor of primordial origin, and is engraved in the living

system of man, a “type” (“archetype”) of all the experiences with feminine beings in the age-long ancestry of man, a deposit, as it were, of all the impressions made by woman; in short, an inherited psychical system of adaptation. Even if there were no women, it would be possible at any time to deduce from this unconscious image how a woman must be constituted psychically. The same is true of the woman; that is, she also possesses an innate image of man.” (Jung, 1953: 100)

Similar to the Shadow, one initially encounters the Anima and the Animus in projected form. These archetypes have a numinous or deeply emotional quality that can explain phenomena like ‘love at first sight.’ Such instances can be understood as the projection of one’s internal archetypal image onto another person, making that person appear extraordinarily captivating:

“Man has developed his Anima archetype by continuous exposure to women over many generations, and woman has developed her Animus archetype by her exposure to men. Through living and interacting with one another for generations, each sex has acquired characteristics of the opposite sex that facilitate appropriate responses and understanding of the opposite sex” (Hall and Nordby, 1973: 46).

Jung, despite the popular gendered perspectives of his time, argued that the traits often labelled as ‘masculine,’ such as autonomy and aggression, are not inherently superior to those considered ‘feminine,’ like empathy and nurturance. Rather, these qualities should be seen as complementary aspects of a whole psyche. This perspective expands on Freud’s emphasis on the masculine psyche by acknowledging the equally important role of the ‘feminine’ aspects. In this sense, the Anima and Animus complexes should not be rejected but engaged with, in their distinctiveness, to bridge the Ego with the broader, objective realm of the psyche. This fosters a more balanced and integrated Self, transcending traditional gender norms to enrich the human experience.

Speaking of enriching human experience, ‘individuation’- another major archetype in Jungian psychology- centres around The Quest for personal wholeness and self-understanding. This lifelong pursuit orbits around what Jung termed the ‘Self,’ a core psychological construct that serves as the unifying principle of individual personality. To make it clearer, Jung suggests that “individuation, or the development of the Self, lies in the identification of Ego-consciousness with the Self” (Jung, 1959: 145). Through individuation, one not only gains a nuanced understanding of their individuality but also achieves a balance between their unique identity and a sense of belonging within the greater human community. That is; “the goal of the individuation process is the synthesis of the Self” (Jung, 1959: 164)

Interestingly, Jung did not see internal conflict as detrimental. In fact, he believed that experiencing conflict is not just a part of the human condition but is absolutely essential for personal growth and maturation. He posited that the friction between internal opposing forces or dualities—be it psychological, moral, or experiential—could lead to a higher state of consciousness if adequately reconciled. These reconciliations often take symbolic forms that function as bridges between the conscious and unconscious mind, serving as transformative agents that facilitate personal evolution. These symbols are multi-faceted and complex, providing a language that transcends the limitations of rational thought.

Jung argued that these transformative symbols, often referred to as archetypes, were not individual inventions but part of the collective human psyche—amassed from shared human experiences across time and space. Yet he also pointed out the sociocultural obstacles that could impede the process of individuation. Specifically, societal norms often discourage individuals from fully exploring aspects of themselves deemed inconsistent with their gender. Men, for instance, may be discouraged from tapping into their emotional or nurturing sides, while women might face social barriers when expressing assertiveness or ambition. Jung saw this as detrimental not just to individuals but also to society at large, especially in cultures where feminine qualities are not valued as much as masculine traits.

Although Jung's theories have not received the same widespread acceptance as Freud's, this could be attributed to various factors. For one, Jung's ideas were often seen as more complex, mystical, or even arcane, less suited for straightforward scientific discourse. Critics like Ernest Jones, who was Freud's biographer, have dismissed Jung's theories as drifting into the realm of pseudoscience. Despite this scepticism, it is worth noting that Jung's study of ancient myths, and symbols, and even his exploration of topics like astrology and Eastern religions have a lasting appeal. These archetypes, recurrent in cultural tales and even in the dreams and fantasies of those undergoing psychological treatment, could be indicative of an innate set of predispositions or frameworks within the human psyche.

Moreover, Jung's work introduced several critical constructs to psychology. Most notably, he was the first to describe the primary personality orientations of extroversion and introversion, and he also outlined four essential psychological functions—thinking,

feeling, sensing, and intuiting. By combining these orientations and functions, Jung developed a framework that identified eight pure types of personalities. Later psychologists, such as Hans Eysenck and Raymond Cattell, have built on these fundamental ideas, embedding them into the more comprehensive theories of personality that followed.

To sum it up, Jung's ideas may not have achieved mainstream ubiquity, but they have been instrumental in various subfields of psychology, especially in understanding personality complexities and the underlying shared symbols that captivate human imagination. His contributions offer a rich diversity of concepts that continue to engage both scholars and the general public alike.

2.4. More on Archetypes

In addition to the fundamental archetypal constructs within Jung's framework of the human psyche, a variety of lesser-known archetypes unfolds, each possessing its own intricate and multifaceted symbolism. These subtle yet profound archetypal patterns interlace with the intricate dance between the collective unconscious and the conscious self, offering a deeper exploration of the profound details within the realm of human experience. In exploring the notion of archetypes further, one finds himself in the complex realm of symbolic representation that threads through human narrative, irrespective of cultural or geographical divergences. Being universal symbols that surface in many ways, archetypes as inherent facets of the collective unconscious, serve as a bridge between the individual and the universal, mirroring the broader human quest for understanding and meaning. In harmony with Jung who posited that archetypes, as primordial images, echo through the collective unconscious shared across humanity, Joseph Campbell, in his monumental work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), searches through the 'Hero's Journey', which revolves around the 'monomyth' concept, a narrative archetype prevalent across various cultures and historical timelines (Campbell, 1949: 28). Jung emphasizes the similarity of the archetypes across time and space:

“From the unconscious there emanate determining influences which, independently of tradition, guarantee in every single individual a similarity and even a sameness of experience, and also of the way it is represented imaginatively. One of the main proofs of this is the almost universal parallelism between mythological motifs, which, on account of their quality as primordial images, I have called archetypes” (Jung, 1959: 58).

While Carl Jung based his theory on the reflections of the “inner world of the man [that] has found its expression in mythical archetypes” (Madran, 2004: 2), he also acknowledged the existence of these reflections that span across various cultures and societies. Since “the ultimate goal of every personality [...] is to achieve a state of selfhood and self-realization” (Hall and Nordby, 1973: 52), the concept of archetypes extends beyond being mere character typologies into situational, symbolic, and image-based ones, each holding a mirror to different dimensions of human experience and societal dynamics. For instance, one of the character archetypes; ‘The Hero’ is a cornerstone in both ancient and modern storytelling, symbolizing the transformative journey toward self-realization and mastery. The Hero is the person who “ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the Hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (Campbell, 1968: 30). Often depicted in literature, film, and folklore, this archetype typically embarks on an epic quest filled with trials, challenges, and ultimate triumph. While Odysseus from Homer’s *The Odyssey* is a classic example, navigating treacherous waters and facing mythical creatures to return home, more contemporary instances like King Arthur (Malory, 1999), Frodo Baggins (Tolkien, 2007) and Harry Potter in J.K. Rowling’s series (1997-2001) similarly resonate with audiences. These heroes face moral and literal battles against evil forces, their journeys intricately tied to themes of friendship, and courage, and some like Harry Potter battle against the complexities of adolescence (Rowling, 1997-2001). Carl Jung posited that the Hero’s Journey signifies the human urge to evolve and conquer psychological barriers, serving as a universal symbol stored in the collective unconscious (Jung, 1947). Joseph Campbell further elaborated on this concept, outlining a Hero’s Journey as a transformative cycle that mirrors the universal human experiences. This archetype has been examined across various cultures and time periods, attesting to its enduring grip on humanity’s collective imagination.

Similarly, The Wise Guide or Mentor archetype plays a significant role in narratives across cultures and time periods, often serving as a catalyst for the Hero’s transformation. This figure embodies wisdom, experience, and often moral integrity, helping the Hero navigate complex challenges both internal and external. As different from the Wise Old Man or the Wizard, the Mentor archetype does not have to be elderly or magical, but he must possess the wisdom and skills necessary to guide the Hero on his quest. Classic

literature and contemporary stories alike feature this archetype. One of the most renowned examples is Obi-Wan Kenobi from George Lucas's *Star Wars* series (Lucas, 1977), who mentors Luke Skywalker in the ways of the Jedi. His wisdom and training equip Luke with the skills and understanding needed to combat the dark forces of the galaxy. Another example is Mr. Miyagi from the *Karate Kid* franchise (Avildsen, 1984), who not only teaches Daniel LaRusso karate but also imparts important life lessons. Through these characters, the Mentor archetype showcases the timeless and universal theme of experienced individuals guiding the next generation and, by doing so, helps to propel the story forward.

The Wise Old Man and the Wizard archetypes “can take various forms: a wise seer, a shaman” (Meletinsky, 1998: 47) and are often considered overlapping or interconnected figures in myth and storytelling. Both are venerable characters endowed with wisdom, experience, and knowledge. They usually serve as Mentors, guiding the Hero on their journey by offering invaluable advice or magical assistance. The Wise Old Man archetype, as identified by Jung, represents wisdom and guidance and is a manifestation of the collective unconscious that provides a roadmap for a hero's transformation (Jung, 1959). The Wizard, on the other hand, is a more specialized version of the Wise Old Man but with the added element of magical or supernatural powers. An iconic example of the Wise Old Man is Gandalf in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 2007), who also serves as a Wizard. His wisdom and magical abilities not only guide Frodo and the Fellowship but also have far-reaching implications for the entire world of Middle earth. Another example would be Dumbledore in the *Harry Potter* series (Rowling, 1997-2001), who serves both as a Wise Old Man and a Wizard, guiding Harry while wielding considerable magical power. These archetypes serve as universal symbols that resonate deeply with audiences, encapsulating the essence of guidance, wisdom, and the transformative power of knowledge.

In storytelling and mythology, ‘The Ally’ and ‘The Sidekick’ archetypes serve as instrumental figures who aid and accompany the Hero on their journey. Both archetypes function as complementary figures, but they operate in slightly different capacities. While The Ally can be an equal partner or a guide, offering specialized skills or knowledge, The Sidekick usually assumes a more subordinate role, providing emotional support and comic relief. These archetypes can be traced back to classical literature and myth, such as the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus in Homer's *Iliad*, where Patroclus,

despite his shorter-lived glory, aids and emotionally supports Achilles. In contemporary narratives, an example can again be found in the *Harry Potter* series, where Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley serve as Allies to Harry, each bringing unique skills and emotional support, with Ron occasionally stepping into the more traditional Sidekick role (Rowling, 1997-2001). These archetypes resonate with Jung's concept of the collective unconscious perfectly, reflecting universal patterns of human interaction and relationships (Jung, 1959). The Ally and The Sidekick often help the Hero confront and resolve their own limitations, serving not just as practical aids but also as catalysts for personal growth and transformation.

In opposition to those helpers, The Villain archetype is often perceived as the counterpart to the Hero, representing traits or qualities that society deems negative or evil. However, in Jungian psychology, the Villain is often closely related to the Shadow archetype, which embodies the darker aspects of personality that an individual might deny or suppress (Jung, 1959). While the Hero represents aspirations and a positive self-image, the Villain encapsulates fear, moral ambiguity, and often, denied aspects of the Self. For example, in Shakespeare's *Othello*, Iago embodies both the Villain and the Shadow, projecting his manipulative and deceitful tendencies as he plots against others (Shakespeare, 1622). In more modern narratives, characters like Darth Vader in *Star Wars* serve as compelling embodiments of the Shadow archetype, presenting a complex interplay between good and evil, and challenging the Hero to confront and integrate their own darker aspects (Lucas, 1977). Jung posited that grappling with one's Shadow is a crucial step toward individuation and psychological integration (Jung, 1959). Such encounters in narratives echo the confrontations that individuals must face within their own psyches, making the Villain archetype not merely a foil for the Hero, but a mirror for inner conflict.

On the situational front, archetypes like The Quest or The Initiation depict fundamental human endeavours and rites of passage. The Quest, often illustrated in epic narratives again like Homer's *Odyssey* or J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* or earlier in the epic of *Gilgamesh*, represents the Hero's Journey toward a significant goal fraught with challenges, reflecting the broader human quest for achievement, self-discovery, and actualization. The Initiation, often seen in narratives involving a coming-of-age theme, encapsulates the transition, growth, and newfound understanding that comes with traversing the threshold from ignorance to knowledge, childhood to adulthood.

Symbolic archetypes, on the other hand, extend into a more abstract realm, painting the human narrative with broad strokes of thematic dichotomies like Good vs. Evil, Light vs. Darkness, or Water vs. Desert. For instance, in *The Archetypes and Collective Unconscious* Jung states, “the contrast between desert and paradise therefore signifies isolation as contrasted with individuation, or the becoming of the Self” (Jung, 1959: 35). This opposition is apparent in the contrast between Utopia vs. Dystopia in the context of Cline’s novel. These symbolic dichotomies are significant for they reflect the eternal human struggle with moral, existential, and environmental forces, echoing the broader human experience of conflict, transformation, and The Quest for equilibrium.

Furthermore, image archetypes like The Tree, The River, or The Garden, evoke a sense of connection to nature, life, growth, and the cyclic nature of existence. These images, often imbued with rich symbolism, hold a mirror to the interconnectedness of man with the natural world, the flow of time, and the continuum of life and death in relation to which human beings seek a stable ground for their existence. Here comes forth the archetype of The Axis Mundi.

2.5. A Centre to Hold Tight: The Axis Mundi

The concept of Axis Mundi, often described as the ‘cosmic axis,’ ‘world centre,’ or ‘world pillar’, finds its roots in various mythologies, philosophies, and religious traditions. Renowned scholar Mircea Eliade argued in *The Sacred and the Profane* that the Axis Mundi serves as an archetypal point of connection between the heavens and the Earth, symbolizing a sacred space where different planes of existence intersect (Eliade, 1959). The Axis Mundi, therefore, can be seen as a universal symbol that transcends cultural boundaries and encapsulates a concentrated point where meaning, energy, and experience converge.

One of the most intriguing facets of the Axis Mundi is its multidimensionality. It can be physical, like a mountain, a temple, or a river; psychological, as in Jung’s concept of the Self as the Axis Mundi of the individual psyche (Jung, 1959); or social, as in community squares and courthouses. In Indigenous Australian traditions, the Axis Mundi can be embodied through the ‘dooring willam,’ a focal point where spiritual and physical dimensions interface, thereby offering an essential cornerstone to the community’s collective meaning and social organization. This passage from Jung’s work can be a notable example where he states that “psychologically, it is again a question of the Self,

enthroned in the place of the middle, and referred to in Revelation as the beloved city (Jerusalem, the centre of the earth)” (Jung, 1959: 146)

In the context of this thesis, which scrutinizes communal gatherings and shared human experiences, the Axis Mundi serves as a theoretical framework or a metaphorical lens. As Eliade has argued in *Images and Symbols*, the Axis Mundi becomes a “Centre of the World” where the community and the individual can experience wholeness (Eliade, 1961). This aligns with the study’s assertion that the Axis Mundi can be an organizing pivot around which collective energies harmonize. The spatial and temporal coordinates of a gathering might vary, but the Axis Mundi provides a metaphysical point of origin—a grounding element—around which the event structures itself.

The human yearning for transcendence, unity, and meaning finds expression through The Quest for the Axis Mundi archetype. In a society plagued by fragmentation, disconnection, and the gradual erosion of traditional values, the pursuit of the Axis Mundi represents a profound journey. It encompasses The Quest for harmony, the exploration of purpose, and the rekindling of a sense of belonging. It symbolizes an inherent aspiration to reconcile the disparate fragments of existence and to nurture a profound connection with the numinous, transcendental forces that shape our reality.

Drawing upon the work of Victor Turner and his analysis of the Ndembu’s ritual practices in *The Forest of Symbols* in 1967, the Axis Mundi serves as a stabilizing force amid the inherent dynamic tensions of a communal gathering. Turner’s concept of ‘communitas,’ a collective energy generated during rites of passage, can be related to the balanced, harmonic energies invoked through the Axis Mundi. Rather than leading to a chaotic whirlpool of Charybdis, the energy generated through the Axis Mundi invokes a structured, orbital balance that integrates and synchronizes a community’s inherent diversity (Turner, 1967).

In both Octavio Paz’s poetry and Franz Kafka’s story *The Top*, the spinning top serves as a metaphorical Axis Mundi, illustrating the point around which diverse energies harmonize and meaning is constructed. These literary examples suggest the Axis Mundi as not just a theoretical concept but an experiential reality that can be tangibly grasped and understood.

The Axis Mundi serves as an indispensable tool for understanding the complexities of communal gatherings, human psychology, and social behaviour. Its multifaceted

nature allows for broad applicability across various disciplines, making it a cornerstone concept that this thesis employs for dissecting and analysing the intricate dynamics of shared human experiences.

As emphasized in previous chapters, in literary and artistic realms, archetypes serve as a potent tool for delving into the human psyche, societal dynamics, and the existential quest for meaning. They provide a shared symbolic language, enabling a deeper exploration and communication of the human experience. Through the lens of archetypes, narratives transcend the personal and the particular, reaching into the universal, resonating with the collective soul of humanity, and enriching the interpretive experience of the audience. The robust interplay of archetypes within a narrative not only enhances its depth, resonance, and allure but also fosters a profound connection between the individual, the collective, and the eternal human quest for understanding, belonging, and transcendence.

In *Ready Player One*, Ernest Cline astutely channels The Quest archetype in portraying a journey toward rediscovering the Axis Mundi, reflecting a broader societal yearning for meaning and purpose. The narrative encapsulates the modern condition, where individuals, feeling adrift in a postmodern, decentred world, find themselves in a relentless pursuit of a grounding reality or Axis Mundi. The protagonist's in-game quest for the elusive 'Easter egg' becomes a metaphor for this larger human endeavour of seeking a stable point amidst existential turbulence.

Cline's narrative, through the lens of a futuristic, dystopian world, serves as a poignant exploration of the contemporary human condition. The Quests undertaken by the characters symbolize a collective endeavour to restore a semblance of meaning in a world where the traditional axes mundi have eroded. This literary venture not only underpins the deep-rooted human need for a grounding essence but also reflects the transformative potential of quests in navigating the complex landscape of modern human experience. Through the vivid storytelling in *Ready Player One*, Cline renders a compelling depiction of the enduring human quest for authenticity and a return to a centred reality in a decentred world.

CHAPTER III

READY PLAYER ONE: ANALYSIS

3.1. Regaining a Stable Ground

As we traverse the intricate maze of the postmodern era, our collective pursuit of meaning, unity, and connection evolves, moulded by the profound challenges of environmental degradation, pervasive social inequality, and the relentless march of technological advancement. Literature has emerged as a pivotal conduit, laying bare these complexities, and acting as a mirror to our fragmented world. In the spectrum of postmodern literature, Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* shines brightly due to its profound and intricate exploration of these contemporary themes.

Ready Player One reveals a narrative that unfolds in a dystopian future. Here, humanity, burdened by environmental catastrophes and profound societal turmoil, seeks solace in the expansive virtual realm of the "Ontologically Anthropocentric Sensory Immersive Simulation" (OASIS) (Cline, 2011: 48). The term "utopia," stemming from the Greek prefix "ou," signifying "no" or "not," conveys negation or the absence of existence (Alihodzic and Jerkovic, 2016). Thus, utopia denotes an unrealizable realm, a place that can never come into being. Within this digitally fabricated utopia, individuals can shed their real-world identities, adopting fresh digital Personas that challenge and blur the conventional boundaries between the material and the virtual. Nonetheless, the concept of achieving a utopian state remains unattainable in reality. The novel portrays virtual spaces as an avenue of escape from societal limitations. In the real world depicted in the novel, society regresses, resulting in the world becoming a dumping ground as individuals turn a blind eye to their predicaments. However, this realm, known as the OASIS, serves as an Axis Mundi, a potent symbol, and a pivotal point of convergence between diverse realms, encapsulating Mircea Eliade's notion of the "centre of the world" (Eliade, 1959: 36). This confluence facilitates transcendence, unity, and the pursuit of meaning, echoing humanity's inherent yearning for spiritual elevation.

The contemporary leaps in technology, exemplified by the launch of Unreal Engine's *Metahuman Animator for Unreal Engine 5.2* software, resonate deeply with the themes woven into *Ready Player One*, further erasing the boundaries between reality and virtuality (Epic Games, 2023). These technological strides herald a future where individuals might seamlessly transition into their virtual alter egos, seamlessly merging

their physical identities with their digital avatars. This intricate fusion of realities symbolizes the evolving constructive collaboration between storytelling and ludology, mirroring both our collective and individual aspirations for connection, significance, and self-discovery.

In navigating the intricate tapestry of intertwined themes and symbols in *Ready Player One*, this thesis employs an interdisciplinary approach, merging the tenets of archetypal analysis with Jungian psychoanalytic viewpoints. We look for the manifestation of the Axis Mundi archetype, a profound symbol that reverberates with the fundamental craving for a central point of connection and resonates within the collective unconscious of humanity. It embarks on an in-depth expedition into the journeys undertaken by the characters within the OASIS, tracing the captivating intersection of literature and ludology. The incorporation of skeuomorphic design elements—astute imitations or replications that foster familiarity within a gaming environment—cultivates a more immersive experience for OASIS users. Simultaneously, these design elements deeply resonate with the timeless symbols interwoven into the narrative, enhancing the playful engagement with the text.

Furthermore, this thesis explores the archetypes that encapsulate various phases of The Hero's Journey, a ubiquitous motif of adventure and transformation that binds us through our shared human experience. The age-old concept of this journey, The Quest, is identified by Campbell in detail as a result of which he utilizes the term “monomyth,” a phrase he attributes to James Joyce, and proposes the ancient notion that the enigmatic force driving inspirations, revelations, and heroic actions in stories from various cultures is inherently present in all humans (Joyce, 1939: 581). Individuals who identify with heroic themes of challenges and quests in their own experiences, goals, artistic expressions, and even dreams are essentially recognizing a shared psychological truth. This truth suggests that the creative and spiritual aspects of an individual's life have a reciprocal influence on the outer world, just as much as the mythical realm shapes the individual. The emergence of “the monomyth” concept stems from this perception, aiming to explain the underlying similarity in adventure patterns embedded in the collective unconsciousness of individuals facing real-world challenges (Campbell, 1949: 28). Additionally, this exploration dissects the roles these archetypes play in enriching the narrative's depth and their contributions to the transformative journeys undertaken by the characters.

By peeling back the intricate layers of symbolism, it also illuminates the compelling presence of the Axis Mundi archetype within our postmodern epoch and provides profound insights into the narratives that define our society, where technology becomes an inseparable facet of our being as Baudrillard states, “the meticulous operation of technology serves as a model for the meticulous operation of the social” (Baudrillard, 1994: 36). It underscores the collective potency harboured by symbols, archetypes, and immersive encounters in shaping our perception of reality. This revelation underscores how these elements shape the contours of our modern, technology-infused world. In essence, its goal is a meticulous inquiry into the treatment of hyper-reality within the novel, utilizing mythological imagery and both individual and universal archetypes. It delves into the phenomenon of reality erosion within the framework of postmodern society and offers an elucidation of this phenomenon by contextualizing it within the prism of archetypal theory in connection with the spectrum of human experience.

In summary, this comprehensive exploration of *Ready Player One* casts a luminous beam on the intricacies of our era, the profound influence exerted by technology on our existence, and the unceasing quest for significance and interconnection amid these multifaceted challenges. By interweaving the realms of literature and ludology, the novel prompts introspection, spurring contemplation about our existence, our aspirations, and the boundless potentials that materialize at the crossroads where storytelling and game design converge.

3.2. Are you Ready, Player One?

In Ernest Cline’s evocative *Ready Player One*, readers are transported into a dystopian future that artfully blurs the boundaries between actual and simulated reality. The novel unfolds in the year 2045, mirroring the present’s escalating predicaments, depicting a world grappling with the dire repercussions of environmental degradation, pervasive social inequality, and a profound sense of disillusionment:

“The polar ice caps are melting, sea levels are rising, and the weather is all messed up. Plants and animals are dying off in record numbers, and lots of people are starving and homeless. And [people]’re still fighting wars with each other, mostly over the few resources [they] have left.” (Cline, 2011: 17).

As Cline puts it, “Human civilization is in ‘decline.’ Some people even say it’s ‘collapsing’” (Cline, 2011: 18). As the societal fabric unravels, humanity discovers refuge within the sprawling, immersive digital universe known as the OASIS.

Crafted by the enigmatic and posthumously influential James Halliday, the OASIS embodies an expansive metaverse, extending a lifeline to those seeking escape from the desolation of the physical realm. Serving as a gateway to boundless digital domains, it confers upon users the power to surpass the constraints of their real-world circumstances, granting freedom, limitless adventure, and the enticing chance to reconstruct their identities. To be more precise, “it is a globally networked virtual reality most of humanity now uses on a daily basis” (Cline, 2011: 1). The allure of the OASIS proves irresistible, drawing in a multitude of users yearning for purpose, belonging, and meaningful existence within its seemingly infinite expanse. Although people are “desperate for work, food, electricity” they seek “reliable OASIS access” (Cline, 2011: 21) as Oasis provides an escape and functions as an Axis Mundi.

Incorporating a virtual economy system into the OASIS only adds another layer of complexity and allure, making it not just a digital escape but also a place of commerce and livelihood. The inclusion of “surreal estate,” as termed by the creators, integrates a sense of material consequence into the virtual experience (Cline, 2011: 59). By having a designated business zone in Sector One, where virtual real estate is bought and rented, the OASIS effectively merges the digital and material worlds, linking them economically. This economic entanglement manifests in city-sized shopping malls and expansive storefronts that unfold across virtual planets, essentially redrawing the boundaries between reality and hyperreality. The ease of virtual urban development—achieved in the “blink of an eye”—amplifies the allure of this simulated environment (Cline, 2011: 59).

This phenomenon aligns with our broader discussion on the pervasive and encompassing nature of hyperreality in the postmodern world. The OASIS, complete with its economic infrastructure, is a compelling example of how virtual and augmented realities can usurp the ‘real world’ as our primary space for interaction and existence. Here, commerce is not just an accessory to the gaming experience, but it is also a core component, further blurring the lines between game and reality, between play and work. In a world increasingly enmeshed in digital landscapes, the OASIS exemplifies the complex interplay between economics, identity, and place in the era of hyperreality.

Embedded within this setting is the narrative of our protagonist, the young and astute Wade Watts. Wade, a denizen of the impoverished and desolate stacks in Columbus, Ohio, finds his life, like that of countless others, intricately intertwined with

the OASIS. The demise of Halliday sets off an extraordinary chain of events: the revelation of a complex puzzle within the digital realm, with Halliday's immense fortune and control over the OASIS as the ultimate reward. This event, known as the "hunt for Halliday's egg," initiates a treacherous, high-stakes quest that transcends the boundaries of the OASIS and the physical world, forever entwining the virtual and the corporeal (Cline, 2011: 19). Wade describes the experience as follows:

"Then the Hunt for Halliday's Easter egg began. That was what saved me, I think. Suddenly I'd found something worth doing. A dream worth chasing. For the last five years, the Hunt had given me a goal and purpose. A quest to fulfil. A reason to get up in the morning. Something to look forward to" (Cline, 2011: 19).

The pursuit of Halliday's egg precipitates an array of formidable trials, dangerous competitors, and a relentless race against time for Wade. As he navigates the labyrinthine enigmas of the OASIS and unravels the intricate life of its creator, Wade realizes that The Quest transcends personal ambition. It transforms into a bold defiance of the existing order, an avenue to uncover hidden truths, and an opportunity to reclaim a world ensnared by its digital allure. Thus, *Ready Player One* directs a discerning gaze toward our increasing reliance on virtual realities and the implications of this shift on our perception of self and society. Beyond all these, both The Quest which is the search for the eggs on the surface and the reward offered by this Quest, namely the OASIS itself, symbolize the purpose and meaning for which Wade, like others, is longing. In other words, Wade, who is the embodiment of The Hero by all means, is after conquering OASIS which stands for the Axis Mundi archetype. His quest and success at the end of it are indispensable for him because if he yearns for a centre that will provide him with a purpose and meaning, he should be brave enough to face challenges. Additionally, completing his quest is significant if his desire is to leave behind the ambiguity and chaos of the real world that turned into a dystopia long ago.

As mentioned earlier, the profound concept of the Axis Mundi archetype, which has roots deeply embedded in various mythologies and religious doctrines throughout human history, surfaces within the collective unconsciousness. It acts as a metaphorical axis or a crucial point of connection, bridging disparate realms or planes of consciousness. This symbolic representation encapsulates humanity's enduring pursuit of transcendence, unity, and meaning, particularly in a world that is becoming increasingly fragmented and disillusioned. From sacred trees to cosmic mountains and central pillars, the Axis Mundi archetype takes on various forms in mythological narratives, all serving the crucial

function of connecting the terrestrial and divine spheres. In *The Sacred and Profane*, Eliade states that:

“For it is not a matter of geometrical space, but of an existential and sacred space that has an entirely different structure, that admits of an infinite number of breaks and hence is capable of an infinite number of communications with the transcendent. We have seen the cosmological meaning and the ritual role of the upper opening in various forms of habitations” (Eliade, 1961: 57).

The spiritual and psychological significance of the Axis Mundi archetype cannot be underestimated. It stands as the metaphorical linchpin around which the universe rotates, offering stability and direction amidst the chaotic and ever-changing realities of existence. By bridging the gap between the physical and metaphysical, the mundane and the sublime, the Axis Mundi acts as a conduit for communication and interaction across divergent realms and levels of consciousness.

Ernest Cline brings to the forefront the resonating power of the Axis Mundi archetype, embodied in the protagonist Wade Watts’ transformative odyssey within the OASIS. Similar to the sacred tree, cosmic mountain, or central pillar found in various mythologies, the OASIS emerges as a symbolic epicentre of connection and transcendence for Wade. His journey, initially driven by the pursuit of the ultimate prize within this virtual realm, evolves into a deeper search. It transforms into a quest for unity, meaning, and the restoration of balance in a fractured world dominated by technology. As clearly stated, “the moment [he] began searching for the egg, the future no longer seemed so bleak” (Cline, 2011: 19) for him.

Ernest Cline’s *Ready Player One* artfully unfurls a narrative rich in symbolic elements, motifs, and events that form the bedrock for the presence of the Axis Mundi archetype throughout the story. Almost every scene provides a lens into the protagonist’s, Wade Watts, search for deeper meaning and purpose in a world marked by disillusionment and the allure of the virtual realm.

The presence of the Axis Mundi archetype is evident through the depiction of the stacked trailers in the protagonist’s rundown neighbourhood. The stacks serve as a physical representation of the connection between the real and virtual worlds, acting as a threshold for Wade Watts, the Hero, to embark on his quest for transcendence and unity in a postmodern world. The text describes the trailer stacks as “twenty-two mobile homes

high” (Cline, 2011: 20), highlighting their towering and interconnected nature, which mirrors the symbolic Axis Mundi found in various mythologies and religions.

The stacked trailers, with their makeshift network of recycled pipes, girders, support beams, and footbridges, not only provide a setting for the story but also embody the idea of interconnectedness between different dimensions. This theme aligns with Jungian psychoanalytic theories, as the Axis Mundi archetype represents a bridge between the conscious and unconscious realms, connecting the individual’s inner world with the larger collective unconscious. As Wade navigates through the dark alleys and narrow passages between the trailers, he is symbolically embarking on a journey of self-discovery and exploration of the deeper layers of reality.

In the opening moments, we encounter Wade amidst the stark and desolate living conditions of the stacks in Columbus, Ohio. This stark contrast between his physical surroundings and the boundless digital universe of the OASIS bears witness to his longing for transcendence. The OASIS, a virtual reality metaverse, emerges as a living embodiment of the Axis Mundi archetype. It serves as an escape from the harsh realities of the physical world, evolving into a symbolic nexus of infinite prospects and potential connections. Wade explains how it feels to be in the OASIS:

“Playing [...] videogames never failed to clear my mind and set me at ease. If I was feeling depressed or frustrated about my lot in life, all I had to do was tap the Player One button, and my worries would instantly slip away as my mind focused itself on the relentless pixelated onslaught on the screen in front of me” (Cline, 2011: 14).

Wade’s expression points to a poignant resonance that emerges between Jean Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality and the OASIS within *Ready Player One*. Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation* introduces the notion that the postmodern era replaces reality with simulations, blurring distinctions between the real and the simulated (Baudrillard, 1981). This resonance becomes strikingly relevant when examining the OASIS, a meticulously simulated universe existing within the novel’s universe. Cline explains it and states that “a lot of OASIS users didn’t care about their avatar’s power level or bother with the gaming aspects of the simulation at all. They only used the OASIS for entertainment, business, shopping, and hanging out with their friends” (Cline, 2011: 50). Also, the fact that “items in the OASIS had just as much value as things in the real world (sometimes more)” (Cline, 2011: 27) proves that the OASIS quickly evolved into a new way of life (Cline, 2011: 56). In other words, for them, it is not a game at all, but

it is a simulation that can replace reality which blurs the distinction between real and simulated.

Within the narrative framework, the OASIS materializes as an embodiment of hyperreality. “The OASIS [is] an online utopia, a holodeck for the home” (Cline, 2011: 58-59) effectively obliterating the boundary between reality and simulation and, “every day, more and more people had reason to seek solace inside Halliday and Morrow’s virtual utopia” (Cline, 2011: 59). Users exist in a constant state of hyperreality within this digital construct, where their interactions, experiences, and even identities are moulded and shaped by the virtual environment. The OASIS assumes paramount importance, overshadowing the physical world in significance, accessibility, and influence. For Wade and his peers, the OASIS transcends mere escapism—it metamorphoses into a domain of purpose and identity, a realm where the pursuit of transcendence and unity takes root. This observation introduces a stratum of complexity to The Quest for the Axis Mundi archetype. In the hyperreality of the OASIS, individuals traverse a domain transcending the bounds of the corporeal realm, offering access to inexhaustible potentials and connections. Yet, a pivotal question emerges: Does the OASIS’s hyperreality aid or hinder the characters’ aspirations for transcendence and unity? The yearning for a centre to hold is so powerful, that Wade and his peers are ready to lose themselves in the OASIS:

“Being human totally sucks most of the time.
Videogames are the only thing that make life bearable.
–Anorak’s Almanac, chapter 91, verses 1-2” (Cline, 2011: 11)

However, while the simulated environment provides an escape from the limitations of the physical realm with the statement, “there are no laws in the OASIS” (Cline, 2011: 153), it also prompts contemplation about the authenticity and genuine connections that can be nurtured within the hyperreal landscape. Characters grapple with the challenge of discerning meaning and forging authentic connections within a simulated environment where experiences are filtered through the lens of the digital world. One of the examples from the novel is Wade’s thoughts about Art3mis. He thinks as follows and says: “This “girl,” whom I’d been cyber-crushing on for the past three years, might very well be an obese, hairy-knuckled guy named Chuck” (Cline, 2011: 88). This tension between hyperreality and genuine connection sets the stage for a nuanced exploration of the character’s pursuit of transcendence and unity within the context of the Axis Mundi archetype. The dialogue between Art3mis and Parzival is a great example of this:

“Art3mis: But you still don’t really know anything about me. Or my real personality.

Parzival: This is the OASIS. We exist as nothing but raw personality in here.

Art3mis: I beg to differ. Everything about our online Personas is filtered through our avatars, which allows us to control how we look and sound to others. The OASIS lets you be whoever you want to be. That’s why everyone is addicted to it.

Parzival: So, IRL, you’re nothing like the person I met that night in the tomb?

Art3mis: That was just one side of me. The side I chose to show you.” (Cline, 2011: 170,171)

One of the other attempts of Wade is as follows:

“She shook her head. “You don’t live in the real world, Z. From what you’ve told me, I don’t think you ever have. You’re like me. You live inside this illusion.” She motioned to our virtual surroundings. “You can’t possibly know what real love is.”” (Cline, 2011: 186)

The incorporation of hyperreality and simulation in our exploration of the novel deepens our comprehension of the intricacies surrounding the pursuit of the Axis Mundi archetype. The OASIS, existing within the realm of hyperreality, offers individuals a pathway towards transcendence and unity. To emphasize this fact, while Wade mentions his OASIS console, he refers to it as “the computer that powered [his] world” (Cline, 2011: 191). However, this world also presents simultaneous challenges regarding authenticity and genuine connection. For instance, at the beginning of level two, the quotation says; “I’m not crazy about reality, but it’s still the only place to get a decent meal. —Groucho Marx” (Cline, 2011: 167), which means; as characters navigate this simulated domain, they seek a central locus of connection and significance within this hyperreal landscape. Their journeys serve as a reflection of humanity’s broader yearning for transcendence and unity within a postmodern context, where hyperreality and simulations mould our perceptions and experiences. Questioning his existence and seeking a stable ground seems like a challenge faced by each and every human being. This questioning and the human condition are exemplified in the novel:

“I started to figure out the ugly truth as soon as I began to explore the free OASIS libraries. The facts were right there waiting for me, hidden in old books written by people who weren’t afraid to be honest. Artists and scientists and philosophers and poets, many of them long dead. As I read the words they’d left behind, I finally began to get a grip on the situation. My situation. Our situation. What most people referred to as ‘the human condition.’ It was not good news. I wish someone had just told me the truth right up front, as soon as I was old enough to understand it” (Cline, 2011: 16).

Ready Player One, through its scrutiny of hyperreality and its impact on the Axis Mundi archetype, lays bare the intricate interplay between simulations, authenticity, and The Quest for transcendence. The narrative invites readers to contemplate the blurred boundaries that delineate reality and simulation, the transformative potency inherent in virtual realms, and the challenge of forging sincere connections within the domains of hyperreality. The novel becomes a poignant catalyst for introspection, reminding us that while simulations offer avenues for escapism and self-discovery, the pursuit of meaning

and authentic connections perseveres. Individuals grapple with the complexities of hyperreality as they endeavour to unearth the Axis Mundi archetype. The blurred boundaries that delineate reality and simulation cause people to lose themselves, as exemplified in the following quotation by Wade:

“I quickly lost track of time. I forgot that my avatar was sitting in Halliday’s bedroom and that, in reality, I was sitting in my hideout, huddled near the electric heater, tapping at the empty air in front of me, entering commands on an imaginary keyboard. All of the intervening layers slipped away, and I lost myself in the game within the game” (Cline, 2011: 105).

Moreover, the application of VR goggles and VR haptic suits within the OASIS introduces the notion of a hypnoid state—a concept resonant with the division of consciousness and the existence of an alternate personality. By immersing themselves in the virtual domain, users can temporarily shed their physical identities, embracing diverse Personas within the OASIS. Wade takes immersion to a whole new level. In the OASIS, he employs a range of cutting-edge technologies that meld his virtual experiences with his physical senses. As Wade describes it, “the chair [that works] in conjunction with [his] Shaptic Bootsuit, a full-body haptic feedback suit” creates a profound sense of presence (Cline, 2011: 191). This suit is a marvel, adorned with an intricate exoskeleton composed of artificial tendons and joints. This intricate network serves a dual purpose: it can sense Wade’s movements and inhibit them as needed. Furthermore, Wade’s experience is enhanced by “a weblike network of miniature actuators [...] to make [his] skin feel things that [aren’t] really there” (Cline, 2011: 191). These actuators simulate tactile sensations, enabling him to feel objects and surfaces that exist solely in the virtual realm. Wade dons “a pair of state-of-the-art Okagami IdleHands haptic datagloves,” which further heightens the illusion of touch (Cline, 2011: 192). These gloves create the sensation that he is interacting with objects and surfaces that lack physical existence.

To complete the sensory immersion, Wade relies on the “Olfatrix smell tower” (Cline, 2011: 192), which convincingly recreates odours. Additionally, he employs the “Okagami Runaround omnidirectional treadmill” (Cline, 2011: 193) to move within the simulation as if he were navigating the physical world. This treadmill adds a layer of physicality to his virtual experiences, blurring the line between reality and simulation.

Wade’s immersion is so profound that he becomes reluctant to disconnect. His password to enter this world, “No one in the world ever gets what they want and that is beautiful,” signifies his deep commitment to this hyperreal existence (Cline, 2011: 199).

Conversely, Wade's experience in the real world is one of dissatisfaction. He even contemplates darkening his bathroom mirror because he cannot bear to see his own reflection (Cline, 2011: 195). This aversion is rooted in his desire to avoid confronting the blurred boundary between reality and simulation:

“The sight of my tiny one-room apartment, my immersion rig, or my reflection in the mirror—they all served as a harsh reminder that the world I spent my days in was not, in fact, the real one” (Cline, 2011: 195).

For Wade, the least favoured part of his day is the time spent in the real world. He goes as far as to refer to his life within the simulation as his ‘real life,’ highlighting the extent of his immersion and the stark contrast between his two worlds:

“The hour or so after I woke up was my least favorite part of each day because I spent it in the real world. This was when I dealt with the tedious business of cleaning and exercising my physical body. I hated this part of the day because everything about it contradicted my other life. My real life, inside the OASIS” (Cline, 2011: 195).

Through the experience of entering a hypnoid-like state, a concept closely related to double consciousness, Wade assumes an entirely different Persona. This transformation strongly implies that the OASIS functions as an Axis Mundi. As Wade reflects:

“Standing there, under the bleak fluorescents of my tiny one-room apartment, there was no escaping the truth. In real life, I was nothing but an antisocial hermit. A recluse. A pale-skinned pop culture–obsessed geek. An agoraphobic shut-in, with no real friends, family, or genuine human contact. I was just another sad, lost, lonely soul, wasting his life on a glorified video game. But not in the OASIS. In there, I was the great Parzival. World-famous gunter and international celebrity. People asked for my autograph. I had a fan club. Several, actually. I was recognized everywhere I went (but only when I wanted to be). I was paid to endorse products. People admired and looked up to me. I got invited to the most exclusive parties. I went to all the hippest clubs and never had to wait in line. I was a pop-culture icon, a VR rock star. And, in gunter circles, I was a legend. Nay, a god.” (Cline, 2011: 198).

This phenomenon parallels the pursuit of transcendence symbolized through the Axis Mundi archetype and mirrors the human quest for higher truths and the exploration of multifaceted identities. The hypnoid state within the OASIS signifies the complexity of consciousness, offering a canvas for self-discovery and transformation as users delve into a world where the distinction between reality and simulation blurs. This melding of identity and experience speaks to the profound resonance of the Axis Mundi archetype, which strives to bridge worlds and elevate consciousness.

In essence, the juxtaposition of hyperreality and the hypnoid state within the context of *Ready Player One* underlines the intricate connection between simulation, authenticity, and the eternal pursuit of the Axis Mundi archetype. The narrative prompts us to contemplate the multidimensional nature of our contemporary experiences, where the virtual and the real coalesce, offering both opportunities for introspection and challenges in The Quest for transcendence and unity. Wade's journey takes us to explore this situation to the end, serving as a profound exploration of the blurred boundaries between reality and simulation. His experiences within the OASIS highlight the complexities of human identity and connection in a digital age, urging readers to question the authenticity of their experiences and the nature of reality itself. In this intricate interplay of virtual realms and genuine human emotions, the novel not only entertains but also provokes deep reflection on the nature of existence in an increasingly digital world.

“For [Wade], growing up as a human being on the planet Earth in the twenty-first century [is] a real kick in the teeth. Existentially speaking” (Cline, 2011: 16), yet within the OASIS, he undergoes a profound shift in consciousness, adopting a different identity. This transformative aspect of the hypnoid state aligns with the Axis Mundi archetype's overarching themes as Wade explores the virtual realm, seeking meaning, connection, and purpose beyond his physical reality. The hypnoid state reflects contemporary existence's fragmented nature and offers a temporary respite from the physical world's limitations, allowing individuals to transcend their ordinary lives and embark on self-realization and unity journeys. Furthermore, in the OASIS, the characters' avatars are viewed as their true identities rather than mere Personae. This aspect of the narrative underscores the notion that the OASIS serves as an Axis Mundi, a hub where individuals can transcend their physical limitations and express their true selves:

“Halliday and Morrow referred to the OASIS as an “open-source reality,” a malleable online universe that anyone could access via the Internet, using their existing home computer or videogame console. You could log in and instantly escape the drudgery of your day-to-day life. You could create an entirely new Persona for yourself, with complete control over how you looked and sounded to others. In the OASIS, the fat could become thin, the ugly could become beautiful, and the shy, extroverted. Or vice versa. You could change your name, age, sex, race, height, weight, voice, hair color, and bone structure. Or you could cease being human altogether, and become an elf, ogre, alien, or any other creature from literature, movies, or mythology. In the OASIS, you could become whomever and whatever you wanted to be, without ever revealing your true identity, because your anonymity was guaranteed” (Cline, 2011: 57).

Aech's character perfectly illustrates this fluidity of identity, who, in the virtual realm, is perceived as a male while being a woman in reality. From a Jungian perspective, Aech, due to societal pressures in real life, may not have the opportunity to express her true identity and therefore has to create a 'Persona'. However, this Persona might actually reflect her true 'Self'. According to Jung, a Persona is often an outward mask an "outward face" created by an individual to conform to societal norms and expectations (Jung, 1982: 81). However, at times, this Persona can become a person's true identity.

Aech's situation becomes evident from the moment they come out to her mother about her sexual identity. Initially, her mother refuses to believe that Aech is gay, but when Aech reveals that she has been in a relationship with a girl they met online for nearly a year, their true identity emerges. This moment is highlighted as the point at which Aech finds the courage to express her true Self. The mother's reaction may have reinforced the idea that Aech needs to hide her true Self:

"Aech told me that she hadn't seen or spoken to her mother since leaving home on her eighteenth birthday. That was the day Aech had finally come out to her mother about her sexuality. At first, her mother refused to believe she was gay. But then Helen revealed that she'd been dating a girl she met online for nearly a year" (Cline, 2011: 320-321).

However, the avatar that Aech creates in the OASIS allows her to express her true identity. This avatar may actually reflect Aech's true 'Self' because the OASIS provides an environment where users can externalize their inner worlds. In a pivotal moment, the protagonist, Wade discovers that the formidable Aech, "the most feared and ruthless arena combatant in the entire OASIS, [...] is actually a young African American woman" (Cline, 2011: 319). This revelation aligns with the scholarship in the related field, where it has been observed that "African women writers have become the first ethnic women writers to raise their voices" (Ayan, 2002: 6). Aech's choice to engage in the OASIS as she pleases serves as a virtual platform for her to assert her identity and amplify her voice, in effect liberating herself from societal constraints. In other words, Aech leverages the freedom offered by the simulated reality of the OASIS to embody her true Self, participating in a long-standing tradition of African American women raising their voices through various platforms.

Therefore, Aech's avatar in the OASIS may represent her true identity, and from a Jungian perspective, this avatar might be seen as an expression of her true Self. Moreover, according to Carl Jung's analytical psychology, the concept of the Self can be seen as an

archetype representing a central axis of individuation and integration within the psyche. Therefore, the journey to find the Self can also be seen as a longing for the Axis Mundi.

Another example can be observed in the character of Halliday himself. During the Anorak's invitation video, he appears as "not a sixty-seven-year-old man, ravaged by time and illness. He looks just as he did on the cover of Time magazine back in 2014, a tall, thin, healthy man in his early forties, with unkempt hair and his trademark horn-rimmed eyeglasses" (Cline, 2011: 2-3). In the OASIS, individuals can take on any appearance they desire, highlighting the transformative power of this virtual world: "Halliday is dancing, too—something no one ever saw him do in real life" (Cline, 2011: 2-3), which suggests that his repressed Self finds expression in the OASIS because, in real life, he is actually an introvert. According to Jungian psychology, consciousness tends to categorize individuals into specific types, such as "extroverts or introverts" (Jung, 1921: 2). This implies that extroverted or introverted behaviours are generally conscious actions that can be understood in particular ways. Although behaviours of extroversion and introversion often appear to be balanced, one behavioural pattern usually dominates, while the other remains in the realm of the unconscious. In the novel, Halliday is portrayed as quite introverted, someone who does not enjoy interacting with people or expressing himself. However, he can experience his suppressed emotions, feelings, and his suppressed unconscious in the OASIS. As Cline puts it, in real life "he was hyperkinetic, aloof, and so socially inept that the interviewers often came away with the impression he was mentally ill" (Cline, 2011: 55) in contrast to the image he created in the OASIS. Within the world he created, "Halliday's appearance also changes once again, as he morphs into his famous OASIS avatar, Anorak—a tall, robed wizard with a slightly more handsome version of the adult Halliday's face (minus the eyeglasses). Anorak is dressed in his trademark black robes, with his avatar's emblem (a large calligraphic letter "A") embroidered on each sleeve" (Cline, 2011: 5). Finally, he assumes the character of Anorak, who is revered as the god of the OASIS. This revelation defies traditional notions of identity and emphasizes that the OASIS is a platform for individuals to realize their aspirations and live their desired lives within the simulation.

Analysing the hypnoid state and fluidity of identity deepens our understanding of the complexity and significance of the Axis Mundi archetype in this plot. It highlights the potential for individuals to access alternate consciousness states and embark on transformative journeys within virtual realms. The OASIS serves as a liberation symbol,

allowing characters like Aech or Halliday to authentically express themselves and challenge societal norms. The hypnoid state symbolizes the multiplicity of human experience and the collective longing for self-discovery and transcendence in a fragmented and technologically driven society.

Upon entering the OASIS, Wade's fascination with its numerous worlds, quests, and challenges becomes evident as he states, "The scope of the simulation was staggering" (Cline, 2011: 5). He seeks a higher truth, something beyond his reality, within this virtual domain. The hunt for the ultimate prize, Halliday's Easter egg, represents The Quest for a higher purpose, a transformative journey akin to the archetypal Hero's Journey. The novel opens with the news of James Halliday's death, and the subsequent announcement of the contest, where Wade Watts exclaims, "That kid was me" (Cline, 2011: 9). This declaration immediately establishes Wade as the protagonist embarking on the Hero's Journey, a central element of the Axis Mundi archetype. Additionally, As Halliday reads his last will and testament, outlining the rules of the contest, Anorak describes The Quest as a series of challenges involving "three hidden keys" and "three secret gates" (Cline, 2011: 6). This process aligns with the Hero's Journey, emphasizing the initiation and transformation that the Hero must undergo to reach The End, where the ultimate prize awaits. Moreover, the emergence of 'gunters' as a subculture dedicated to the contest exemplifies the individuation process and the Hero's Journey. Wade describes them as individuals who "devote every free moment to searching for the Easter egg," indicating their commitment to self-discovery and integration (Cline, 2011: 8). The gunters embody The Hero's quest for transcendence and meaning, as they navigate the challenges and obstacles laid out by Halliday. This journey toward individuation, central to the Axis Mundi archetype, resonates with readers, as it reflects the universal human desire for purpose and meaning. These elements reflect The Hero's quest for self-realization and self-discovery. Wade's pursuit of the Easter egg symbolizes the longing to discover a profound truth that transcends the OASIS itself, pointing towards a universal yearning for meaning and unity.

In the novel, we encounter the enigmatic figure of James Halliday, the departed creator of the OASIS. Halliday's presence, though he is gone, remains a powerful force within the narrative. "Anorak's Invitation" commences with the sound of trumpets, accompanying the opening strains of the old song, "Dead Man's Party" (Cline, 2011: 2). Even though he has long departed from the physical world, "for years gunters had

speculated that Anorak still roamed the OASIS, now as an autonomous NPC. Halliday's ghost in the machine" (Cline, 2011: 84). This suggests that he still exerts control over the OASIS and its inhabitants.

Halliday serves as a potential embodiment of the Axis Mundi archetype, holding the knowledge and means for transcendence and meaning within the virtual realm. Interestingly, 'Anorak' was a nickname bestowed upon Halliday by a female British exchange student during his high school years. He cherished this name so much that he adopted it for his favourite D&D character, a potent wizard who later made appearances in many of his video games (Cline, 2011: 54).

Within Anorak's Invitation video, there is a notable reference to the Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) which is a game centred around quests where players form an adventuring party to explore fantasy worlds, embark on epic quests, and gain experience. The Dungeon Master (DM) takes on the role of the game's referee and storyteller. The reference to the game is also apparent for "a freeze-frame of this scene appears nearly identical to a painting by Jeff Easley that appeared on the cover of the Dungeon Master's Guide, a Dungeons & Dragons rulebook published in 1983" (Cline, 2011: 6). Consequently, Halliday's legacy assumes the role of a guiding force, inspiring and shaping The Quests undertaken by Wade and the other denizens of the OASIS. In essence, he becomes the Dungeon Master while the rest of the OASIS users form the 'Dead Man's Party'. Halliday's Persona represents a central point of connection within the OASIS, guiding individuals on their own journeys towards self-discovery and the restoration of unity. The significance of Halliday's character as an Axis Mundi underscores the centrality of The Quest for meaning and connection in the postmodern world.

Ready Player One establishes a fragmented and disenchanted world backdrop and introduces the underlying quest for transcendence and purpose aligned with the Axis Mundi archetype. We witness Wade's initial steps towards a higher truth, his yearning to transcend his circumstances, and his realization that the OASIS holds the potential for a unifying and transformative experience through carefully crafted symbols, motifs, and events.

By analysing these elements within the novel, we lay the groundwork for a more in-depth exploration of how the Axis Mundi archetype unfolds throughout the novel. Wade's journey mirrors the archetypal Hero's Journey, as he navigates the virtual and

physical realms, encounters challenges, and seeks to attain a higher truth and purpose. The Axis Mundi archetype serves as a guiding force, propelling the narrative towards a greater understanding of transcendence, unity, and The Quest for meaning in a postmodern era. This analysis allows us to gain insight into the profound themes embedded within the plot and its timeless search for a symbolic centre connecting realms, symbolizing transcendence, and offering unity and meaning in a fragmented world. It is worth noting that this theme of searching for an Axis Mundi and its reflection in the microcosm of our personal universes resonates beyond *Ready Player One* and is evident in other postmodern novels as well. By examining additional postmodern works in possible future research, we can further illustrate the prevalence and significance of the search for an Axis Mundi in contemporary literature. These examples will serve as supporting evidence in the realm of postmodern novels.

3.2. Archetypes of the OASIS

From a Jungian perspective, the main character, Wade Watts, in *Ready Player One*, embodies a complex weave of archetypal facets that provide depth to his character development. Central to these archetypes are the Hero and the Seeker. Even before he begins his quest, we get some indications that he assumes the Hero archetype. Wade explains; “my mom once told me that my dad had given me an alliterative name, Wade Watts because he thought it sounded like the secret identity of a superhero. Like Peter Parker or Clark Kent” (Cline, 2011: 15). Moreover, his avatar’s nickname also suggests that he is both a hero and a seeker. When “the Hunt [begins, he decides] to become a gunter, [he renames his] avatar Parzival, after the knight of Arthurian legend who had found the Holy Grail [which is a quest story of a hero and a seeker.] The other more common spellings of that knight’s name, Perceval, and Percival, had already been taken by other users. But [he prefers] the name Parzival, anyway.” (Cline, 2011: 28). He assumes the role of the seeker archetype as he experiences the joy of discovery and exploration. In the novel, we learn that Warren Robinett, the creator of the game “Adventure,” conceals a secret within the game’s code without disclosing it to anyone. The game is manufactured and distributed worldwide by Atari, and they have no knowledge of the secret room’s existence. It is not until a few months later that they stumble upon the Easter egg’s presence when children from around the world begin to uncover it. Wade is one of those kids, and his initial discovery of Robinett’s Easter egg remains one of the most exhilarating gaming experiences of his life (Cline, 2011: 5).

Additionally, there is more reference to the embodiment of the Hero and the seeker archetypes. For instance, in order to find the last gate's secret hint, there is an "Arthurian image of the guitar in the stone" (Cline, 2011: 263). Once he pulls the guitar out of the stone he is required to play "discovery, which describes the Hero's discovery of the guitar in a room hidden behind a waterfall" (Cline, 2011: 263). In this sense, in line with his journey, he is both the Hero and the Seeker. The dance between these two archetypes forms the crux of Wade's journey within the OASIS, where he is not just seeking the ultimate prize but also navigating a journey that permeates deeper than the virtual boundaries.

In line with the Hero archetype, Wade bears traits of bravery, tenacity, and the readiness to confront daunting challenges. His quest, sparked by a virtuous cause, is to unearth the truth and restore equilibrium in the OASIS universe, which is one of the honourable duties of the Hero:

"My generation had never known a world without the OASIS. To us, it was much more than a game or an entertainment platform. It had been an integral part of our lives for as far back as we could remember. We'd been born into an ugly world, and the OASIS was our one happy refuge. The thought of the simulation being privatized and homogenized by IOI horrified us in a way that those born before its introduction found difficult to understand. For us, it was like someone threatening to take away the sun or charge a fee to look up at the sky." (Cline, 2011: 34)

This journey reveals Wade's unselfish yearning to contest injustice and safeguard the innocent. He faces ordeals, surmounts personal obstacles, and showcases resilience when faced with adversity, thereby personifying the Hero archetype's transformative aspects. An illustration of this is his confrontation with the IOI's Sixers. They are called sixers because they have employee numbers that are "six digits in length and they also [begin] with the numeral 6" (Cline, 2011: 33). Cline explains their identity as follows:

"Sixers" was the derogatory nickname gunters had given to employees of Innovative Online Industries. IOI (pronounced eye-oh-eye) was a global communications conglomerate and the world's largest Internet service provider. A large portion of IOI's business centred around providing access to the OASIS and selling goods and services inside it. For this reason, IOI had attempted several hostile takeovers of Gregarious Simulation Systems, all of which had failed. Now they were trying to seize control of GSS by exploiting a loophole in Halliday's will." (Cline, 2011: 33)

Despite the intimidating force and resources of this corporate entity, Wade remains undeterred, "he [refuses] to give up. Until an avatar reached Halliday's Easter egg"

(Cline, 2011: 266). He even says, “he [is] going to reach the Third Gate, or die trying” (Cline, 2011: 266) reflecting the courage inherent in the Hero archetype.

As mentioned above Wade is not just seeking the prize, but he also tries to protect the Central axis of himself because “the moment IOI [takes] it over, the OASIS would cease to be the open-source virtual utopia [he]’d grown up in. It would become a corporate-run dystopia, an overpriced theme park for wealthy elitists.” (Cline, 2011: 33)

Wade’s journey remarkably mirrors the stages of the Hero’s Journey delineated by Joseph Campbell, encompassing the call to adventure, the crossing of thresholds, and the eventual return, laden with newfound wisdom and insight. Campbell’s assertion of situating the Hero archetype at the core of archetypal analysis resonates profoundly with Jung’s conviction that the ultimate purpose of human existence is self-realization.

Given Wade’s status as a hero and the narrative’s essence as a quest, it undeniably embodies the quintessential Hero’s Journey. As Campbell eloquently stated, a Hero’s Quest involves “a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return” (Campbell, 1968: 35).

There is more than one moment but the first call to adventure is more significant. For instance, Wade’s ‘call to adventure’ arrives when he first hears “Anorak’s Invitation” (Cline, 2011: 2) and makes the conscious choice to pursue The Quest. As Anorak recites, he has much to learn “in order to reach the end” (Cline, 2011: 69). He continues “to watch and read and listen and study, preparing for the day” (Cline, 2011: 67). Then, when he first decodes Anorak’s riddle, this increases his urge to pursue The Quest and symbolises his initial crossing of the threshold.

Wade’s journey within the OASIS is marked by the presence of other thresholds. He must discover three keys and unlock three gates, each hidden behind intricate puzzles and challenges. Along with this heroic quest, he has to face crucial decisions that not only impact his own fate but also influence the lives of others. This universal narrative of the Hero’s Journey closely aligns with Wade’s adventure, characterized by his encounters with challenges, guidance from Mentors and Allies, trials that test his character, and, ultimately, his profound transformation (Campbell, 1968).

In perfect alignment with Joseph Campbell’s concept of the Hero’s Journey, Wade’s arduous odyssey reaches its climax as he crosses the ultimate threshold, marked

with the triumphant message, “CONGRATULATIONS! YOU HAVE REACHED THE END! READY PLAYER 1” (Cline, 2011: 358). This proclamation heralds not only his victory over the most formidable of thresholds but also his discovery of the coveted centre of his quest: “at the very centre of the screen, there was a large white oval with pixelated edges. An egg. The egg.” (Cline, 2011: 362). The significance of the egg in this context is profound, as it serves as a potent symbol of rebirth, encapsulating yet another crucial facet of the Hero’s transformative journey.

“The descent... is seen as a metaphor for death and rebirth; as a sacrificial rite in which the Hero’s suffering will renew the vigor of society; as a purification rite in which one is cleansed of sin... as a self-annihilating act, after which one will transcend one state of life and enter a higher, exalted state; or simply as a growing-up, leaving innocence and childhood behind.” (Stillman, 1985: 40)

Thus, once again, our exploration of the Axis Mundi archetype woven into the narrative fabric of *Ready Player One* unravels layers of symbolism and thematic significance. Wade’s unwavering pursuit of Halliday’s elusive egg serves as a microcosm of the timeless human yearning for unity, meaning, and a profound connection with the universe. This journey, a voyage of discovery, lays the path towards existential answers, tranquillity, self-discovery, and a renewed sense of belonging in an increasingly digitized world.

His journey attains its pinnacle as he emerges as the triumphant champion of the contest, finally achieving the overarching goal that has driven him throughout. In return for his remarkable feat, he earns not only wisdom but also immeasurable power. It is at this moment that Halliday imparts his final words of wisdom and responsibility: “your avatar is immortal and all-powerful. Whatever you want, all you have to do is wish for it. Pretty sweet, eh?” (Cline, 2011: 363) Leaning in closer, he lowers his voice, making a personal plea: “do me a favor. Try and use your powers only for good. OK?” (Cline, 2011: 363). Here, in Wade’s triumphant moment, the Hero’s Journey concept, as delineated by Joseph Campbell, finds its vivid manifestation. The primary objective of his archetypal journey is to unite his consciousness with his unconsciousness, which Jung describes as the amalgamation of “two incongruous halves which together should form a whole” (Jung, 1959: 287). The culmination of this quest results in the Hero’s attainment of wholeness, signifying a profound rebirth into a more enriched and complete life—a pinnacle achievement in the process of individuation.

In essence, *Ready Player One* can be perceived as a quintessential quest narrative, and Wade's journey encapsulates the classic elements of the Hero's Quest. The narrative structure follows the archetypal pattern of departure, initiation, and return - a common motif in quest narratives. As Wade sets off on his adventure, he encounters a series of challenges, Allies, and adversaries, leading to profound personal growth and transformation. His quest for the ultimate prize within the OASIS mirrors his broader pursuit of self-discovery, understanding, and unity within a fragmented and technologically driven society. The search for the Axis Mundi archetype propels Wade on a journey to find a point of connection between different realms and attain a deeper understanding of his identity and place in the universe.

Wade's embodiment of the Seeker archetype is further exemplified by his relentless curiosity and thirst for knowledge. He displays an insatiable desire to delve into the depths of his own psyche and unravel existential questions. This is evident in his meticulous research into James Halliday's life and the 1980s pop culture, as well as his tenacity in solving riddles and understanding the underlying principles of the OASIS:

“For the past five years, I'd devoted all of my free time to learning as much as I possibly could about James Halliday. I'd exhaustively studied his life, accomplishments, and interests. Over a dozen different Halliday biographies had been published in the years since his death, and I'd read them all. Several documentary films had also been made about him, and I'd studied those, too. I'd studied every word Halliday had ever written, and I'd played every videogame he'd ever made. I took notes, writing down every detail I thought might be related to the Hunt. I kept everything in a notebook (which I'd started to call my “grail diary” after watching the third Indiana Jones film). The more I'd learned about Halliday's life, the more I'd grown to idolize him. He was a god among geeks, a nerd über-deity on the level of Gygax, Garriott, and Gates. He'd left home after high school with nothing but his wits and his imagination, and he'd used them to attain worldwide fame and amass a vast fortune. He'd created an entirely new reality that now provided an escape for most of humanity. And to top it all off, he'd turned his last will and testament into the greatest videogame contest of all time.” (Cline, 2011: 52)

As Wade embarks on his pursuit of the ultimate prize within the OASIS, his journey takes on a dual significance - not just as an external adventure but also as an inner quest for self-exploration and individuation. A notable example of this is Wade's solitary life

inside his hideout at the ‘stacks,’ where he dedicates himself to exploring the OASIS, learning, and growing in his understanding of the virtual world “The van [is his] refuge. [his] Batcave. [his] Fortress of Solitude. [...] It [is] also where [he conducts his] ongoing quest to find Halliday’s Easter egg.” (Cline, 2011: 25) His quest for the Axis Mundi archetype, symbolizing transcendence, unity, and meaning, becomes a central aspect of his personal journey, aligning it with the archetypal quest story.

One notable character is Art3mis, who personifies the archetype of the Wise Guide or the Mentor. Artemis was the Greek goddess of the hunt (Cline, 2011: 93) so it makes sense for a gunter to have that nickname, however; Artemis was also the goddess of Wisdom. For example, in Homer’s *Odyssey*, she gives courage and wisdom by mentoring Prince Telemachus. Likewise, Art3mis serves as a guiding presence for Wade, providing him with advice, knowledge, and support throughout his quest. Like the archetypal Mentor, Art3mis possesses wisdom, experience, and a deep understanding of the OASIS. She aids Wade on his journey, helping him navigate challenges and grow as a character. Art3mis’ guidance and presence reinforce the importance of mentorship and the transformative power of wisdom in the Hero’s Journey. Moreover, it can be said that Art3mis also functions as the Axis Mundi archetype because she is another reason which drives Wade. It is worth mentioning once more that Axis Mundi can also be a human and Wade has a “massive cyber-crush on Art3mis” (Cline, 2011: 35). As the story continues his quest takes a different direction that reveals his feelings:

“Suddenly, I wanted to win the contest more than ever. Not just for the money. I wanted to prove myself to Art3mis. And I wanted the Hunt to be over so that she would talk to me again. So that I could finally meet her in person, see her true face, and try to make sense of how I felt about her.” (Cline, 2011: 211)

Art3mis is not the only helper of Wade during his quest, but Aech embodies the archetype of the Ally or the Sidekick who accompanies Wade on his heroic journey through the OASIS. Aech’s unwavering support, loyalty, and unwavering camaraderie epitomize the essential role of Allies in the Hero’s Odyssey. Together, they navigate challenges, their bond reinforcing the overarching theme of collective effort and collaboration in the face of daunting trials. As they forge ahead, the OASIS becomes a backdrop not only for quests and adventures but also for profound connections that bridge the gap between the virtual and the real, displaying the intricate tapestry of human relationships in a digital age.

Within the expansive virtual universe of the OASIS, Wade Watts forms an extraordinary connection with the enigmatic character Aech. This profound bond, characterized by mutual understanding and camaraderie, defies the limitations of the digital realm. Despite never meeting in person, Wade and Aech share a friendship so deep that Aech considers Wade his best friend. The poignant sentiment is encapsulated in Wade's reflection: "Though we'd never actually met in person, he'd told me more than once that I was his best friend, so I assumed he was just as isolated and lonely as I was" (Cline, 2011: 39). This virtual friendship transcends the boundaries of the OASIS, seeping into Wade's everyday life. He goes to great lengths, even reprogramming Max, his autonomous home butler, to evoke feelings of grief because "it [reminds him] of hanging out with Aech. And [he] really misses hanging out with Aech" (Cline, 2011: 195). This profound sense of longing illustrates how online relationships can carry genuine emotional weight, shaping individuals' thoughts and actions.

Moreover, the OASIS emerges as a refuge, a sanctuary where individuals can transcend the boundaries of identity and become whoever they desire. In this sprawling virtual realm, a statement from Cline's novel rings true: "The OASIS was the best thing that had ever happened to both women and people of color." (Cline, 2011: 320) It represents a realm where gender, race, and physical attributes are malleable, granting its users unparalleled freedom. Aech's experience embodies both the freedom and the transformative power of the OASIS. Initially, upon entering the digital wonderland, Aech heeds her mother's advice and creates an avatar resembling a Caucasian male, named 'H,' This avatar serves as more than just a digital disguise; it allows Aech to freely explore her identity without constraints. The moniker 'H,' given by her mother, becomes her chosen identity in the online realm, symbolizing her newfound freedom.

As time passes and Aech begins her online schooling journey, her mother takes an extraordinary step to protect her. In the world of online education, Aech's mother resorts to deception, misrepresenting her daughter's race and gender on the school application. In response, Aech submits a photorealistic image of her male avatar's face, meticulously modelled after her own features. (Cline, 2011: 320-321) This intricate web of deceit underscores the profound impact of the OASIS, providing individuals like Aech with the liberty to navigate the complexities of identity and experience a world where authenticity and self-expression flourish.

From a Jungian perspective, Aech's experience within the OASIS takes on a profound dimension. The Persona she crafted in this digital realm transcends the conventional understanding of a mere facade. Instead, it becomes a true representation of her inner Self. Jung's concept of the Persona typically refers to the social mask we wear in the external world, but in Aech's case, it evolved into an authentic manifestation of her identity. In the OASIS, Aech finds a unique space where her avatar and online Persona become symbolic expressions of her inner psyche, allowing her to explore and embrace her true Self. This transformation reflects the Jungian idea of individuation, a process of becoming one's whole and authentic Self by integrating both conscious and unconscious elements of the psyche. The OASIS serves as a transformative vessel, liberating Aech from societal expectations, racial constructs, and gender norms, enabling her to embody her genuine Self beyond the limitations of the physical world. Describing their friendship, Wade says: "We'd connected on a purely mental level. I understood her, trusted her, and loved her as a dear friend. None of that had changed or could be changed by anything as inconsequential as her gender, or skin color, or sexual orientation" (Cline, 2011: 321). His description proves the power of the OASIS one more time.

Within the realm of Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One*, the character of Nolan Sorrento emerges as a multifaceted embodiment of the Shadow or the Villain archetype. These additional insights shed light on the intricate nature of Sorrento's villainy and his role in the Hero's Journey.

Firstly, Sorrento's sinister nature is subtly foreshadowed through his IOI identification number, "655321" (Cline, 2011: 135), a reference to Alex from *A Clockwork Orange*. (Burgess, 2011) This allusion not only links Sorrento to a notorious fictional antagonist but also hints at his capacity for cruelty and malevolence.

Secondly, Sorrento serves as a formidable adversary, actively thwarting the Hero's progress. Wade's poignant reflection on Sorrento's actions underscores the depth of their enmity. Sorrento's ruthless pursuit of power, including the murder of Wade's aunt, neighbours, and friends like Daito, solidifies his status as the story's antagonist. Wade's determination to confront Sorrento and expose his malevolence amplifies the overarching clash between good and evil:

"Sorrento had tried to kill me. And in the process, he'd murdered my aunt, along with several of my neighbors, including sweet old Mrs Gilmore, who had never hurt a soul. He'd also had Daito killed, and even though I'd never met him, Daito had been my friend.

And now Sorrento had just killed Shoto's avatar, robbing him of his chance to enter the Third Gate. Sorrento didn't deserve his power or his position. What he deserved, I decided in that moment, was public humiliation and defeat" (Cline, 2011: 339)

Thirdly, the symbolic contrast between Wade and Sorrento is strikingly evident when Wade is hailed as a "god" within the OASIS, while Sorrento is likened to the "devil." This duality reinforces their roles as archetypal adversaries, embodying the eternal struggle between light and darkness.

"You are a god, from this moment forth!" (Cline, 2011: 123)

"Once I'd done my homework on Sorrento, I felt like I was ready to sit down with the devil." (Cline, 2011: 133)

Lastly, Sorrento's willingness to resort to extreme measures, such as threatening to kill to achieve his goals, underscores his unrestrained pursuit of power and control. His actions epitomize the classic traits of a villainous archetype, making him a formidable force in the narrative.

"Tell us how to reach the First Gate. Right now. Or we will kill you. Right now." (Cline, 2011: 143)

In essence, Sorrento's character not only embodies the Shadow or Villain archetype but also serves as a pivotal element in the Hero's Journey, challenging Wade to confront the darker aspects of his own psyche and ultimately triumph over adversity.

For over a decade, Anorak has been prominently displayed on Halliday's personal website. In the words of Ernest Cline, a "short looping animation showed his avatar, Anorak, sitting in a medieval library, hunched over a scarred worktable, mixing potions and poring over dusty spellbooks, with a large painting of a black dragon visible on the wall behind him" (Cline, 2011: 7). Dressed in obsidian black robes, Anorak's portrayal as a robed wizard in *Ready Player One* strongly resonates with the archetype of the Wise Old Man, symbolizing wisdom, and guidance.

Much like this universal figure that recurs throughout various mythologies and narratives, Anorak serves as a Mentor to the story's protagonist, Wade Watts. The wizard-like appearance of Anorak amplifies his role as a sagacious guide, offering indispensable wisdom and direction to Wade throughout his quest. However, Anorak's wisdom extends beyond mere intellectual acumen. It provides a nuanced comprehension of the obstacles Wade confronts both within the virtual world of the OASIS and in reality. In doing so, Anorak epitomizes the timeless Wise Old Man archetype, becoming a linchpin in Wade's

Hero's Journey as he endeavours to decipher the enigmas of the OASIS and realize his ultimate objectives.

Even after the completion of Wade's quest, Anorak—also Halliday—imparts wisdom about the pitfalls of living solely in a hyperreal world because in the real world, “the lines of distinction between a person's real identity and that of their avatar [begins] to blur. It [is] the dawn of new era, one where most of the human race now spent all of their free time inside a videogame” Cline, 2011: 60):

“I created the OASIS because I never felt at home in the real world. I didn't know how to connect with the people there. I was afraid, for all of my life, right up until I knew it was ending. That was when I realized that, as terrifying and painful as reality can be, it's also the only place where you can find true happiness. Because reality is real. Do you understand?” Wade replies, “Yes, I think I do.” Halliday responds with a wink, “Good, don't make the same mistake I did. Don't hide in here forever”” (Cline, 2011: 364).

In stark contrast to Halliday, his former partner Ogden Morrow embodies a different manifestation of the Wise Old Man archetype, yet he is no less significant in guiding Wade on his journey. Morrow, known as “the Great and Powerful Og, the Gray-bearded wizard” (Cline, 2011: 180), also serves as a beacon of wisdom and guidance, but his approach differs greatly from Halliday's.

Ogden Morrow parted ways with GSS, the company he co-founded with Halliday, because, as he put it, “we were no longer in the video game business.” (Cline, 2011: 120) His departure was motivated by his belief that the OASIS had turned into something malevolent: “It had become a self-imposed prison for humanity,” he states, “a pleasant place for the world to hide from its problems while human civilization slowly collapses, primarily due to neglect” (Cline, 2011: 120). Morrow's insights reveal his acute awareness of the blurred lines between virtual and actual realities and the dire consequences thereof.

Unlike Halliday, who serves as a Mentor within the confines of the OASIS, Morrow accompanies Wade in the physical world. His role is clearly illustrated when he tells Wade, “She [Art3mis] said she'd wait for you at the center of my hedge maze. It's an easy maze. It shouldn't take you very long to find her” (Cline, 2011: 369). The labyrinth Morrow refers to is not random but intentionally designed to mirror the one in the game Adventure, a point underscored by Halliday in his invitation video.

In Wade's Hero's Journey, the 'Axis Mundi,' or the focal point, in the OASIS is the Egg or Anorak's Castle. In the real world, however, this focal point is represented by Art3mis, situated at the centre of Morrow's maze. Thus, while Anorak/Halliday functions as the Wise Old Man guiding Wade within the OASIS, it is Morrow, or "Og," who serves as his real-world counterpart, guiding him through the complexities of reality.

It is worth noting once more that to these archetypal characters, the virtual world of the OASIS itself can be seen as an embodiment of the Axis Mundi archetype. It serves as a central point of connection, not only for Wade and the other characters but for countless users seeking transcendence and unity in a fractured reality. The OASIS becomes a symbol of hope and liberation, offering individuals the opportunity to transcend their physical limitations and explore their true selves within the vast virtual realm.

One of the symbols in the story, which later becomes a significant reference for Wade, is the Almanac, often referred to as his "bible" (Cline, 2011: 61). Following the release of Anorak's invitation, an icon resembling a compact leather-bound book appears just below the Scoreboard. This icon serves as a convenient gateway for users to access a free digital copy of Anorak's Almanac, a compilation of Halliday's journal entries. In ludology terminology, this small leather-bound book icon can be described as a 'Skeuomorph,' a symbol that universally conveys a particular meaning, akin to the concept of archetypes in psychology.

By analysing these characters and the OASIS through the lens of Jungian archetypes, we gain a deeper understanding of their significance within the narrative. Each character's archetypal role contributes to the overarching themes of the Hero's Journey, The Quest for transcendence, unity, and the restoration of meaning in a postmodern world. Through their interactions and relationships, the characters embody various facets of the human experience, presenting opportunities for self-discovery, personal growth, in Jungian terms, the individuation process, and the exploration of archetypal dynamics.

Ready Player One invites readers to contemplate the role of archetypes in their own lives and the potential for personal transformation. It reminds us of the universality of the Hero's Journey, the significance of Allies and Mentors, and the challenges posed by the Shadow aspects of ourselves and society. By exploring these archetypal dynamics, the novel offers a profound reflection on the human condition and The Quest for

transcendence and unity in a fragmented and technologically driven society. As Cline hopes “—like Halliday’s hunt—this book will inspire others to seek out their creations.” (Cline, 2011. 374)

The labyrinthine virtual worlds in Ernest Cline’s *Ready Player One* serve as a microcosm of our own increasingly complicated universe, driven by advances in technology and shifts in human consciousness. The conceptual framework of this analysis, rooted in Carl Jung’s archetypes, sheds light not only on the intricate characters and plot of Cline’s novel but also illuminates broader issues facing our postmodern society. It is within this interstice—between the digital and the physical, the symbolic and the real—that the importance of the Axis Mundi archetype manifests.

The Axis Mundi serves as the hypothetical “centre of the world,” around which all else revolves. It is the point of connection between Heaven and Earth, functioning as both a guidepost for travellers and a focal point for the collective unconscious. In *Ready Player One*, the OASIS becomes the Axis Mundi, replacing traditional centres of meaning, such as religious temples, cultural landmarks, or geographical locations, with a mutable, digital landscape. The reasons for this shift are manifold but largely indicative of our times. As Jean Baudrillard suggests, we exist in a state of “hyperreality,” where the simulation has overtaken the real. The OASIS becomes more than a game; it becomes a repository for human aspiration, interaction, and even transcendence, much like any Axis Mundi in mythological or religious frameworks.

Wade Watts or Parzival, embodying the Hero/Seeker archetype, embarks on a journey not just to win a contest but to rediscover a sense of authentic Self in a world distorted by the virtual. His path aligns closely with Joseph Campbell’s monomythic Hero’s Journey. In the end, he reaches the egg which symbolises rebirth, constituting a quest for self-actualization and collective well-being. Art3mis, fitting the Wise Mentor archetype, serves as his guiding force, challenging and nurturing him as he navigates through the perilous maze of the OASIS. But it is not just about the individuals; their collective journey symbolizes the collective human struggle for meaning in a world increasingly devoid of it.

The Villain Sorrento, the embodiment of the Shadow archetype, personifies the dark forces threatening to consume this digital Axis Mundi for corporate gain. Sorrento’s desire to commodify the OASIS into a controlled, profit-driven domain illuminates the

challenges posed by commercializing sacred spaces, whether digital or physical. In Sorrento, we see the perversion of the Axis Mundi, turned from a site of communal spiritual significance to one of monetary value, a tragic devaluation symbolic of the times we live in.

On the narrative level, the concept of ludonarrative—where gameplay intersects with the story—offers an additional layer of interpretive richness. As players navigate the OASIS, they become part of an unfolding story, embodying roles that offer an escape from the fractured realities they inhabit. However, rather than creating avatars as idealized versions of themselves, most players, paradoxically, represent their true selves within the simulation. This inversion of expectations underscores the notion that the OASIS functions as a modern-day Axis Mundi: a locus for the pursuit of unity, self-discovery, and transcendence in a fragmented world.

In tandem with the pursuit of self-discovery and transcendence within the OASIS, we must grapple with the implications of these archetypes and narratives for the world beyond the novel. The collective unconsciousness—a concept also rooted in Jungian psychology—suggests that the resurgence of the Axis Mundi archetype, particularly in digital spaces, reflects deep-seated human concerns. Our postmodern condition, characterized by disillusionment, fragmented identities, and the erosion of traditional structures, has precipitated an existential void. As a result, individuals increasingly turn to digital worlds in search of an Axis Mundi—a central point of reference or meaning that might render coherence to their dislocated realities.

Furthermore, the hypnotic or trance-like state that players enter when immersed in the OASIS can be likened to a form of double consciousness or split awareness. On one hand, they are acutely aware of their physical existence in a deteriorating world; on the other, they are engrossed in a digitally mediated realm where their most treasured dreams seem attainable. This duality serves as both an escape and a form of resistance against a monolithic reality that often seems overwhelming and disempowering. The OASIS serves not only as a sanctuary but also as a plane for working out the contradictions and conflicts that plague the human psyche, effectively acting as a form of digital therapy or even as a form of spiritual practice for some.

Technology's role in all of this is Janus-faced. On one side, technology is the enabler, allowing for the creation of virtual worlds where these modern mythologies can

play out. On the other, it is a catalyst for the very conditions—alienation, loss of meaning, the commodification of personal experience—that make such alternative realities appealing in the first place. The argument that technology is neutral and merely amplifies human intent falls apart under scrutiny; instead, it becomes clear that the medium itself influences how messages are received and internalized.

The dangers of this arrangement are as potent as its advantages. In providing a fertile ground for the emergence of new kinds of Axis Mundi, technology also risks exacerbating the problems it seeks to solve. The ephemeral nature of digital spaces, combined with their susceptibility to commercial and political manipulation, threatens to turn these would-be centres of meaning into hollow shells of their archetypal origins. Thus, as much as the OASIS offers a promise of transcendence and unity, it also poses a significant risk of further fragmentation and disconnection.

The characters of *Ready Player One* offer templates for coping with this complexity. While Wade Watts finds a degree of enlightenment and fulfilment in his journey, his realization that the real world is also a place worth investing in offers a cautionary note. The digital is not meant to replace the physical but to complement and enrich it. Art3mis serves as a reminder of the virtues of wisdom and mentorship in navigating these complex terrains, while Sorrento symbolizes the perpetual danger of losing our way, of allowing the Axis Mundi to be usurped by less noble agendas.

A crucial part of our discussion revolves around Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality—a condition where the simulation is not just a copy of the real but becomes real in its own right, or even supersedes the real. The OASIS is not just a video game or a digital social space; it is a hyperreal environment where the stakes are as high, if not higher than in the “real” world. Economic systems, social hierarchies, and even matters of life and death in the OASIS bear serious consequences. The line between the simulated and the real is not just blurred but erased, further contributing to the Axis Mundi's role in postmodern narratives.

Hyperreality exacerbates the existential issues the characters face, both inside and outside the OASIS. The Quest for self-discovery and transcendence is not confined to finding an Easter egg or gaining digital wealth; it is intricately tied to their identity, self-worth, and place in the world. Yet, the overwhelming nature of hyperreality also opens the possibility for transcendence to be trivialized. When the virtual world feels as “real”

as the physical world, the meaning attached to actions within these spaces can become diluted or distorted. The Axis Mundi's role as a place for transcendence and self-discovery becomes complicated when it is not clear what counts as 'Self' and what counts as 'discovery.'

As we reflect on the increasing prevalence of the Axis Mundi archetype in our postmodern world, several questions emerge for future research. Does the apparent shift in the Axis Mundi's form—from physical or metaphysical to digital—represent a true change in human consciousness, or is it merely a transient cultural expression? Is the trend reversible? Is it desirable? And if digital environments continue to serve as the new Axis Mundi, what ethical considerations arise from the potential for these environments to be controlled, manipulated, or even shut down by corporations or governments?

In conclusion, the *Ready Player One* universe is much more than an engaging story about a young Hero's Quest in a dystopian future. It serves as a powerful lens through which we can examine broader societal shifts, including the migration of archetypal themes and structures into digital arenas. The book offers a multi-faceted analysis, touching on psychology, sociology, technology, and philosophy, offering us the Axis Mundi as a tool for understanding our times.

From our exploration of the Axis Mundi archetype in *Ready Player One*, it is evident that the resonance of this concept has not waned but has found new manifestations in our technologically driven society. As we negotiate our relationships with these evolving digital landscapes, the role of the Axis Mundi in our collective psyche serves both as a warning and as a map, pointing towards both the pitfalls and the tremendous possibilities that lie ahead.

CONCLUSION

Dystopian Sci-fi Novel *Ready Player One*, penned by Ernest Cline, serves as a monumental tapestry, artfully weaving together the disciplines of literature and ludology. It is a novel that engages with the form and substance of the game, and its narrative becomes an extended metaphor for the role of play, challenge, and reward in our lives. By deploying the classical model of the Hero's Journey, Cline constructs a narrative that is grounded in age-old archetypal structures. His protagonist, Wade Watts, undertakes a transformative quest within the vast virtual universe of the OASIS—a cosmos confined only by the limits of human imagination.

This narrative arc is fundamentally rooted in Joseph Campbell's notion of the Hero's Journey, comprising of the elements of departure, initiation, and return. Wade's odyssey parallels this universal mythic template, but Cline introduces a novel dimension to the Hero's Quest by embedding it within the digital landscape of the OASIS. The Axis Mundi—the mythical centre of the world in many religious and mythological cosmologies—is reinvented as the “Easter egg” for which all OASIS players hunt. Its discovery promises material wealth and control over the OASIS, serving as a powerful symbol of transcendence, unity, rebirth, and meaningful existence.

The game mechanics in *Ready Player One* are not extraneous elements; they directly contribute to the narrative richness of the story. Cline deftly employs ludonarrative harmony, where the gameplay mechanics and narrative elements fuse seamlessly, each augmenting the other. Unlike instances where there's ludonarrative dissonance, where the game's mechanics conflict with its narrative, *Ready Player One* showcases a complete and mutual integration. In-game challenges are interlaced with Wade's personal growth and transformation, and his quest to solve the puzzles is metaphorically aligned with the Hero's Quest for self-realization. This concept demonstrates the innovative potential of fusing literature and ludology into a singularly engaging experience.

Ready Player One is not merely an escapist fantasy. It engages deeply with the existential dilemmas of our time. With many people spending a significant chunk of their

lives in virtual worlds—whether gaming, social media, or other online communities—the novel prompts us to confront significant questions about identity, reality, and the nature of existence. The porous boundary between the OASIS and the “real world” becomes a site of critical inquiry into our postmodern condition, marked by fluid identities and the entanglement of the digital and the physical. It explores the postmodern fixation on hyperreality, where the representation of things often becomes more significant than the things themselves.

Baudrillard suggests that in contemporary times, we have grown increasingly dependent on conceptual frameworks and representations to navigate the world. Ironically, these guiding systems have started to shape the very reality they were designed to represent. In this era characterized by simulations and replicas, Baudrillard posits that the issue is not merely one of copying, mirroring, or even mocking reality; it is about replacing actuality with these constructs. His theory goes beyond stating that our modern environment is simply fake or synthetic because the idea of fakery presupposes an authentic reality by which to measure the sham. Instead, he argues that advances in tech and media landscapes have blurred our ability to differentiate what is natural from what is human made. To shed light on this, he introduces a four-tiered spectrum of simulated experiences that replace reality with an escalated form of ‘hyperreality.’ In this saturated world of hyperreality, historical narratives dissolve, and the apocalyptic imagination loses its significance, overridden by an overload of hyperreal data and a deficiency of meaningful context.

While traditional modernist viewpoints create distinct separations between subject and object, individuals, and communities, and artistic versus non-artistic creations, postmodernism rejects such rigid categorizations. While modern art aspires to universality, postmodernism celebrates the unique and the diverse in artistic expressions, challenging any form of compartmentalization. Artists today often adhere to the notion of ‘art for the sake of art,’ highlighting the distinctiveness of the artist’s craft and the idea of progress within the art world. Postmodernism, conversely, emerges as a critique against modernism’s restrictions across all disciplines, questioning the modernist faith in linear progression in art.

Going against the confining modernist framework that attempts to understand human existence and the world through the lens of rationality, postmodernism posits that

such understanding is too narrow. Postmodernists assert that individual identity is ever shifting, lacking fixed attributes, which implies that the significance of any work of art is not solely determined by the creator. Rather, meaning is fluid, shaped by the interpretive lens of the viewer or the reader, and open to multiple interpretations.

In the context of our thesis, this perspective aligns closely with the fluid nature of archetypes and the Axis Mundi in the postmodern world. The ever-changing definitions of these central elements much like postmodern thought itself, defy strict categorizations and are subject to individual and collective interpretation. Therefore, in a world increasingly detached from a fixed reality, the search for an Axis Mundi, or central point of meaning, becomes a complex and deeply personal endeavour. In the same vein, the Axis Mundi can vary from one individual to another, serving as a focal point that people increasingly yearn to discover in our postmodern world.

The narrative also intersects with real-world technological advancements, such as Unreal Engine's introduction of metahuman technology. This contemporary development allows for the creation of astonishingly realistic virtual avatars, adding a new layer of immersion to the digital experience. Characters in *Ready Player One* already use highly detailed avatars, allowing them to live double lives in the virtual world. The metahuman technology serves as an amplification of this fictional premise, offering readers a glimpse into an impending reality where the line between the virtual and the physical is increasingly blurred.

Ernest Cline's novel functions as both an exhilarating narrative and a profound exploration of the human condition. It leverages the mechanics of gaming to provide not merely entertainment but also insight into our deepest psychological and existential concerns. *Ready Player One* demonstrates how the synergy between literature and ludology can enrich our understanding of both individual and collective human experiences. The immersive nature of the story, reinforced by the use of game mechanics and archetypal storytelling, resonates with the reader's intrinsic yearning for connection, purpose, and transcendence in an ever-complex world.

Further evidence of the blurring distinction between the real and the virtual—hallmarks of hyperreality—can be found in the realm of .io games, such as Snake.io. These games, although ostensibly multiplayer, often populate their servers with AI-controlled 'players' to create a more engaging experience. Intriguingly, most players are

aware of this simulation but choose to suspend their disbelief because the experience ‘feels’ real. This willingness to be deceived underscores society’s readiness to immerse itself in simulated realities. Lately, this phenomenon has been taken a step further with the incorporation of advanced AI systems like ChatGPT into gaming environments. These AIs offer real-time, dynamic responses, adding layers of depth to the story and gameplay. The end result is an experience that becomes ever more immersive and indistinguishable from reality. In essence, people are increasingly prepared to engage deeply with simulated worlds, much like the OASIS in *Ready Player One*.

The fictional landscape of the OASIS and the real-world development of Unreal Engine’s metahuman technology serve as a canvas for the exploration of postmodern identities. Characters in the novel often adopt virtual Personas that diverge significantly from their real-world selves. This act of crafting digital avatars enables a form of escapism, yet it also amplifies the postmodern crisis of identity. Who are we if we can be anyone? What remains constant when everything else is malleable?

Metahuman avatars in the context of *Ready Player One* become a powerful symbol, a digital Axis Mundi, at the crossroads of infinite possibilities. These avatars are not mere disguises; they are transformative, allowing individuals to project, experiment with, and sometimes even discover their most authentic selves. This act of shaping a virtual identity becomes a form of narrative in itself—a personal story each individual writes through their choices and actions within the digital landscape.

As the boundaries between literature and ludology continue to blur, the future of storytelling appears rich with possibilities. *Ready Player One* is a testament to how technology can enrich narrative, enabling immersive experiences that engage both our cognitive faculties and emotional depths. Cline’s work suggests that we are only scratching the surface of what’s possible when literature and game design coalesce.

In the ever-evolving tableau of postmodern life, where fragmented experiences and realities overlap and intertwine, *Ready Player One* shines as a beacon guiding us through the labyrinth of our existence. It serves as both an adventure tale and a profound philosophical inquiry, urging us to confront the complex, multi-dimensional aspects of our lives. The Quest for Axis Mundi remains a timeless journey, deeply ingrained in the human psyche, and Cline’s narrative masterfully captures this eternal aspiration.

The book challenges us to find unity and meaning in a dissonant world. It reminds us that even in an age teeming with technology, where virtual experiences often eclipse physical ones, the fundamental human needs for connection, purpose, and transcendence remain unaltered. Through the convergence of literature and ludology, *Ready Player One* illustrates that The Quest for Axis Mundi—whether within the digital ruins of a virtual world or the tangible landscapes of our physical existence—remains the ultimate journey.

Ernest Cline's opus operates on multiple levels—as a compelling narrative, an allegorical exploration of postmodern life, and a technical feat that integrates the principles of game design into storytelling. It is a composite lens through which we can examine the intricate web of our desires, aspirations, and the incessant search for meaning. As we hurtle through a future increasingly mediated by technology, *Ready Player One* stands as a monument to the enduring, transformative power of storytelling. It is a testament to our collective quest for Axis Mundi, the philosophical and spiritual centre that humans have sought since time immemorial.

In the grand symphony of life, as we search for meaning, purpose, and unity, this novel becomes more than mere fiction. It turns into a mirror, reflecting both the complexities of our individual selves and our collective human spirit. Whether it is through the archetypal tales that have existed for millennia or the digital landscapes that represent our latest technological frontier, the eternal search for Axis Mundi continues. And in that quest, *Ready Player One* assures us, that we are never truly alone.

This comprehensive analysis shows how *Ready Player One* surpasses the realm of mere entertainment, positioning itself as a significant cultural artefact. It invites us to question, to search, and ultimately, to discover—much like Wade Watts on his Hero's Journey—our own potential, our own understanding, and our own Axis Mundi within the complex maze of postmodern existence.

Thus, this study has undertaken an in-depth archetypal analysis of Ernest's novel *Ready Player One*, employing a Jungian psychoanalytic framework. By closely examining various archetypes within the narrative, this research not only elucidates the story's thematic complexities but also situates them within a broader psychoanalytic discourse. This methodological approach enriches our understanding of the text while simultaneously highlighting the ongoing relevance of Jungian psychoanalysis for interpreting postmodern works.

The focus of this study amplifies the pivotal role of Jungian principles, particularly the concept of the collective unconscious and its archetypes, in the interpretation of postmodern literary works. Unlike other analytical frameworks, the Jungian approach delves into a shared reservoir of symbolic motifs and archetypes that exist universally across cultures and epochs. By doing so, the analysis transcends the individual unconscious—potentially that of the author—to tap into broader, universally shared themes and archetypes.

This not only enriches our understanding of the text but also extends its reach, imbuing it with a form of archetypal resonance that is deeply meaningful across a wide range of cultural and individual experiences. This harmonizes well with the fluidity and complexity of postmodern narratives, where conventional structures are often subverted, yet still find grounding in archetypal themes. Thus, Jungian psychoanalysis serves as an essential lens through which the nuanced layers of a literary work can be unfurled, offering profound insights into the collective human experience and, by extension, enhancing the intrinsic value and interpretive richness of the literature itself.

Additionally, this study has aimed to bridge the gap between ludology and literature, two fields that often run in parallel but rarely intersect in academic discourse. By examining the concept of Axis Mundi through the lens of the novel *Ready Player One*, this research ventures into an interdisciplinary space where gameplay mechanics and narrative structures coalesce. It brings ludological frameworks into a literary setting, thereby enriching our understanding of both. This blending of disciplines allows for a more nuanced interpretation of postmodern quests for meaning, particularly in the context of emerging digital landscapes where the boundaries between game and life blur. It reveals how elements from game studies can illuminate literary constructs and vice versa, ultimately contributing to a more integrated and holistic understanding of narrative, play, and the human condition.

Lastly, this research aspires to serve as a foundational stepping-stone for future scholars interested in further exploring this multifaceted topic. In doing so, it aims to fill an existing gap in the literature, providing both a theoretical framework and methodological approach that can be built upon in subsequent studies.

In conclusion, this study offers a comprehensive exploration of the Axis Mundi archetype in Ernest's *Ready Player One*, underscoring its growing prevalence in a

postmodern world characterized by fragmented realities and hyperreal simulations. We observe moments where either the OASIS or the character of James Halliday functions as this central point, mirroring the individual's intensified quest for their own Axis Mundi. This representation underscores how our personal microcosms are echoed in the larger postmodern macrocosm. Leveraging the interdisciplinary frameworks of ludology and Jungian psychoanalysis, we unveil the OASIS as the modern Axis Mundi, serving as a sanctuary for individual and collective self-discovery, transcendence, and unity. As technology deepens our immersion into simulated worlds, The Quest for these existential centres—these contemporary Axis Mundi—grows increasingly urgent, reflecting our collective yearning to navigate and make sense of our complex, multilayered realities. Thus, our research stands as a seminal contribution to understanding how ancient archetypal motifs are being reinvigorated to speak to the challenges and aspirations of the human condition in the 21st century.

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VITA

Name and Surname: Miraç ÖZKURT

Mother's Name: Mediha Nazan

Father's Name: İsmail Hakkı

Birthplace and Date: İstanbul / 1993

B. A.: Pamukkale University

Faculty of Science and Letters

Department of English Language and Literature

Graduation Date: 2020

Workplace and Position: American Culture Language School

English Teacher