

ABSTRACT

FOLLOW THE RED: EXPLORING THE ARCHETYPAL EXPERIENCE OF COLOR

by

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Color plays a powerful role in human experience, yet little attention has been paid to its archetypal aspects and implications. Although it is a phenomenon that utilizes – and, indeed, requires – both the physical process of sensation and the psychological process of perception, color most often is studied and understood from a perspective that emphasizes a single aspect of its unified complexity. Depth psychology – with an emphasis on the dialogue between consciousness and the unconscious, Jung’s theory of psychoid archetypes, and Hillman’s archetypal imaginal perspective – offers a unique framework that can unify, rather than separate, different aspects of a phenomenon such as color.

Red is explored across disciplines and cultures as a universally primary color associated with the strong emotions of an experiential image, symbol, and archetype. Utilizing hermeneutic methodology and imaginal approaches, my research engages with manifestations of red as textual data found in ritual, myth, alchemy, literature, theater, opera, film, and graphic art.

The major themes of this research indicate that red frequently appears related to transition and change, and more specifically, to the embodied tensions of ambivalent and often conflictual emotional extremes. In its liminal aspects, red is related to the threshold between the literal and symbolic realms of life and death. This color is not entirely of the physical world and not entirely of the realm of psychoid archetypes, yet has qualities of both, connecting the two realms of psyche and matter.

Red expresses various emotional aspects of the primordial powers associated with the mysteries of life and death. Although one aspect may be emphasized more than another in a particular red image, the color contains both the creative life-preserving energies of *Eros* and the aggressive, destructive energies of *Thanatos* described by Freud. Red's strong physical and psychological qualities can unify opposing forces and contradictions related to these energies and thus can indicate the opportunity for transformation. Through the intensity of red, we are drawn to experience and express the mysteries of *Eros* and *Thanatos* more fully.