

The Green Man Waits: Recognizing the Spirit of Nature

by Christa Harrison

The Green Man is a complex being, though he isn't *exactly* a being. He is the archetype of oneness with nature, the symbol for the life cycle, the protector of Mother Earth, the God of vegetation, and the manifestation the life-force's intelligence. His spirit exists in worldwide myths, traditions and history. There is not one single representation of the Green Man that can be definitively interpreted as "real," for he embodies all. His pulse is the global heart beat.

In my world, my search for the Green Man has become a quest to discover more about humankind's relationship with nature. I know once I find him, I will find a way to come to terms with the ecological heartache of our times. I don't really remember the first time I encountered him — and I think that is partly the inspiration for me to find out about him. How did I know? My Jungian beliefs support my theory that he exists in my mind as a blurred memory for a reason. I know that the first time I consciously saw him, I thought he was beautiful. I looked on him with an inspired awe, and wondered about the culture who revered him enough to place him on the church wall. My ancestral roots nudged me into believing that somehow, I had encountered him before. Was he a memory of pagan times? Was he meant to be a comfort cushion for Christianized heathens? A subtle warning?

An archetype can be thought of according to the older use of the term as one of the eternal ideas of Platonic and NeoPlatonic philosophy and therefore as an ever living, vital, and conscious force, or in the sense in which Jung made use of it as an image from the Collective Unconscious [...]. According to both these theories an archetype such as the Green Man represents will recur at

different places and times independently of traceable lines of transmission because it is part of the permanent possession of mankind. In Jung's theory of compensation, an archetype will reappear in a new form to redress imbalance in society at a particular time when it is needed (Anderson 25).

And we need him now. The "Green Man" is prevalent in numerous cultures. He has numerous names, but similar characteristics. There are certain features that transcend the cultural differences. He is associated with green, nature, and rebirth.

There are at least two figures that are related to the Green Man that do not originate on the European continent. al-Khadir, or Khidr, comes from from the area of the world that was once Mesopotamian. His name translates to mean "verdant" (Matthews 30), and his "footsteps leave a green imprint" (Anderson 29). Spiritually, because he is green, Khadir represents divine wisdom. Khadir has been connected with the legendary St. George, another man associated with green, as well as themes of death and resurrection. "The Green One," as Khadir is sometimes called, is immortal because he drank from the well of life.

Another green figure from world culture is Osiris, the Egyptian god of vegetation and resurrection. Osiris's representation as green god accentuated his status: "For the Egyptians, the color green was so positively associated that 'to do green things' [meant] doing good" (Matthews 29). Osiris taught the Egyptians well.

Isis, the sister and wife of Osiris, discovered wheat and barley growing wild, and Osiris introduced the cultivation of these grains amongst his people, who forthwith abandoned cannibalism and took kindly to a corn diet. Moreover, Osiris is said to have been the first to gather fruit from trees, to train the vine to poles, and to tread the grapes. Eager to communicate these beneficent discoveries to all mankind, he [...] traveled over the world, diffusing the blessings of civilisation and agriculture wherever he went (Frazer).

Osiris was murdered by his brother, but his death allowed for new life. He “became” his son, a boy who is protected by a green snake. The death and resurrection of Osiris was symbolically represented in the Egyptian culture as “mummy cases sown with grain and left in the rain so the grain would sprout — a graphic demonstration of life rising from death” (Matthews 29). Green faced waxed effigies, complete with corn-stuffed interiors have been found in numerous Egyptian tombs (Frazer).

Similarities between Osiris and Dionysus have “led some enquirers both in ancient and modern times to hold that Dionysus was merely a disguised Osiris, imported directly from Egypt into Greece” (Frazer). The Greek God, often associated with wine and drunkenness, is also the God of nature and agriculture. Additionally, like Osiris, he is credited with the cultivation of the land. Dionysus was affiliated with green life:

He was the patron of cultivated trees: prayers were offered to him that he would make the trees grow; and he was especially honoured by husbandmen, chiefly fruit-growers, who set up an image of him, in the shape of a natural tree-stump, in their orchards. He was said to have discovered all tree-fruits [...] and he was referred to as “well-fruited,” “he of the green fruit,” and “making the fruit to grow.” [...] Amongst the trees particularly sacred to him, in addition to the vine, was the pine-tree. [Some found] a particular pine-tree “equally with the god,” so they made two images of Dionysus out of it, with red faces and gilt bodies. In art a wand, tipped with a pine-cone, is commonly carried by the god or his worshippers. [...] the ivy and the fig-tree were especially associated with him (Frazer).

Dionysus was celebrated feverishly. Festivals in honor of him included drinking, music, dancing, and play-acting. Dionysus “represented the ungovernable wildness of spirit” (Matthews 106). Euripedes called him “most gentle and most terrible” (Angelas). Like nature itself, Dionysus

could be as gentle as a sunrise, or as monstrous as a tempest. In each of the previously mentioned Gods, the heart of the Green Man is present, no matter the culture of origin.

Undoubtedly, the foliate heads affectionately studied by Lady Raglan, the Gods ritualistically worshipped by worldly cultures, as well as the myths birthed from those cultures, are related. Lady Raglan, a scholar for the English Folklore Society, published an article in 1939 about foliate sculptures seen in churches across Europe, which she dubbed the “Green Men.” While the artistry of each individual sculpture varies, the premise of the sculptures are homogeneous: A human face with leaves sprouting from the eyes, lips, nose and mouth. Raglan theorized that the foliate heads and the figures on inn signs came from the same root. Her deduction came from the copious amounts of Green Men inns and distilleries around England.

In sixteenth and seventeenth century England, Green Men were prominent entertainers in the pageantry of the time (Senatorial 26). The Green Men had the job of clearing the path for the pageants to take place. Decorated with leaves, the Green Men used flaming torches and fireworks to keep the crowd tame. Evidence of this activity comes from a 1594 play entitled, “The Cobblers Prophecy,” in which a character says, “Comes there a Pageant by Ill [sic] stand out of the greene mans way for burning my vestment” (Wilson qtd. in Senatorial 26). The connection between the two Green Men, the crowd tamer and the spiritual teacher, involves festivity. “[The] function [of the Green Men] was not merely to control the crowd but also to serve as an opening act, employing various antics to elevate the mood of the onlookers [...] The characteristic drollery of the pageant Green Man was to behave as though thoroughly intoxicated” (Senatorial 28). The festive atmosphere of the month of May, known as a celebration of life and the welcoming of Summer, was manifested by the crowd taming Green Man. Icons hanging on signs belonging to inns and distilleries, prompted Lady Raglan to make the connection between the foliate heads and the inn signs. She said, “This figure, I am convinced, is neither a figment of the imagination nor a symbol, but is taken from real life, and the question it

whether there was any figure in real life from which it could have been taken. The answer, I think, is that there is only one of sufficient importance, the figure variously known as the Green Man, Jack-in-the-Green [...], the King of May [...] who is the central figures in the May-day celebrations throughout Northern and Central Europe” (Raglan qtd. in Senatorial 25).

Seasonal festivals honor the arrival of Spring. Related to the theme of rebirth and regeneration, May Day celebrations are a way to embrace the coming of summer and the death of winter. The May Day Games, “Robin Hood’s games,” or “revels,” last for all of May, although the main festival day is on the first. Outlawed in England by the Puritans and the Church in the 1500’s because the May Day festivities “tend[ed] to no end but to stir up our frail nature to wantonness,” the celebrations were restored under the reign of Charles II (Matthews 80). The puritans frowned upon festivities which included dancing around a phallic May Pole, drinking wine, and dancing. Although the celebrations differ from country to country, thematic affinities prevail. Flowers, garlands, and trees, organic symbols of blossoming life, are central to the celebration.

A common European practice is for the young to gather branches, boughs from trees, and flowers from the forest and bring them back to the village. English youth would bedeck their houses with treasures from the forest. Russian villagers would take a birch tree from the forest, and dress it up and keep it as a guest for a few days, until the personified tree was tossed into a river. Swedish youth paraded around their village singing songs. If they were well received, they left a gift of twigs or branches at the house (Frazer).

Another cross-cultural ritual shared by Europeans during the May Games was a dance around the May Pole. The May Pole is a phallic representation of life, also seen as a connection between earth and heaven (Matthews 68). Puritan Phillip Stubbes described the May Pole dance with disgust in a book published in 1583:

All the yung men and maides, olde men and wives, run gadding over night to the

woods, groves, hills, and mountains, where they spend all the night in pleasant pastimes; and in the morning they return, bringing with them birch and branches of trees, to deck their assemblies withall. And no mervaile, for there is a great Lord present amongst them, as superintendent and Lord over their pastimes and sportes, namely, Sathan, prince of hel. But the chieftest jewel they bring from thence is their May-pole, which they bring home with great veneration, as thus. They have twentie or fortie yoke of oxen, every ox having a sweet nose-gay of flouers placed on the tip of his hornes, and these oxen drawe home this May-pole (this stinkyng ydol, rather), which is covered all over with floures and hearbs, bound round about with strings, from the top to the bottome, and sometime painted with variable colours, with two or three hundred men, women and children following it with great devotion. And thus beeing reared up, with handkercheefs and flags hovering on the top, they straw the ground rounde about, binde green boughes about it, set up sommer haules, bowers, and arbors hard by it. And then fall they to daunce about it, like as the heathen people did at the dedication of the Idols, whereof this is a perfect pattern, or rather the thing itself. I have heard it credibly reported (and that *viva voce*) by men of great gravitie and reputation, that of fortie, threescore, or a hundred maides going to the wood over night, there have scaresly the third part of them returned home againe undefiled (Stubbes qtd. in Frazer).

In England, the character of Jack-in-the-Green, a colourful figure, nine feet tall, and covered in greenery and flowers, dances his way around village streets until he dies at the end of his journey in order to release the Summer Spirit. In other parts of Europe, he is known as John Barleycorn, the Corn King, or Green George. “The customs quoted suffice to establish with certainty the conclusion that in these spring processions the spirit of vegetation is often

represented both by the May-tree and in addition by a man dressed in green leaves or flowers” (Mannhardt qtd. in Frazer). Although the exact traditions differ from country to country, the idea that he exists is the spiritual embracing of the Green Man.

Foliate heads are older than 16th or 17th century England. The faces of leaves seen throughout Europe depict pagan icons. With the arrival of Christianity, there was a paradigm shift. The change did not occur overnight, and for many years, the pagans and the Christians were able to live harmoniously. Converting the heathen pagans into Christians was a slow process. Using icons and celebrations close to the pagan heart for Christian purposes made the transition smoother. Hence, the Green Man found himself staring out from Church walls. “Though examples of the green Man image in sculptural remains are comparatively few in the period from the sixth to the beginning of the eleventh century, it was in those centuries that the long, slow transformation in the attitude of Western humanity to Nature took place which was essential to the way in which, during the Middle Ages, the Green Man made a bridge from his pagan origins to a fresh life in the context of Christian art” (Anderson 51).

In order to understand the severity of the change, it may serve well to have an appreciation for the pagan belief system. Tree worship was deeper than a simple respect for the trees, and in turn, nature:

How serious that worship was in former times may be gathered from the ferocious penalty appointed by the old German laws for such as dared to peel the bark of a standing tree. The culprit’s navel was to be cut out and nailed to the part of the tree which he had peeled, and he was to be driven round and round the tree till all his guts were wound about its trunk. The intention of the punishment clearly was to replace the dead bark by a living substitute taken from the culprit; it was a life for a life, the life of a man for the life of a tree (Frazer).

The conversion from paganism to Christianity has been called, “the greatest psychic revolution in the history of our culture” (Anderson 50). The stories of an era emphasize culturally important values. Ovid’s *The Metamorphoses* tells of Ceres, Corn Goddess and mother of Persephone, and the felling of a sacred tree in her grove. The tree was “a great oak, massive with the years, a sacred grove in itself: strands of wool, wreaths of flowers and votive tablets surrounded it, evidence of prayers granted. Often beneath it the Dryads held their festive dances: often, also, linking hands, in line, they circled its trunk’s circumference, its massive girth measuring fifteen arm’s-lengths round.” (Ovid 10). The story continues:

Ceres’s oak-tree trembled all over and gave a sigh, and at the same time its acorns and its leaves began to whiten, and its long branches grew pale. And, when his impious hand made a gash in the trunk, blood poured out of its damaged bark, like the crimson tide from its severed neck, when the mighty bull falls, in sacrifice, before the altar.

All stood astonished, and one of them tried bravely to prevent the evil, and hinder the barbarous double-edged weapon. But the Thessalian glared at him, saying: “Here’s the prize for your pious thought!” and swinging his blade at the man not the tree, struck his head from his trunk (Ovid 10).

Erysichthon succeeded in cutting down the tree, and the nymph who lived within the Oak died. Ceres punished Erysichthon by giving him a hunger that could never be satisfied. He eventually ate himself. While Erysichthon’s story is a metaphor for ecological regard, there are other stories that demonstrate just how much the world changed.

St. Amand, who “brought about the destruction of sacred groves of oaks,” was a missionary who busily converted pagans. In one story, he converted a woman who was also blind. “He put an axe in her hand and told her to cut down the tree. When she had done so, her sight was restored to her” (Anderson 50). The significance and symbolism of this story,

especially when compared to Erysichthon's self destruction, illuminates the paradigm shift that took place.

It might seem odd that a religion that reviled pagan ways would embrace an icon of the faith. However,

Whether consciously or not, the missionary saints needed to bring the greatest source of living power on earth under the guidance of Christ: the power that is in grass and leaf and sap on which all living things depend. Though they knew that demonic forces dwelt among the works of Nature, they had at the same time to assert the goodness of creation, and there arose a dualism between their fear of the demonic and the beauty and usefulness of God's work (Anderson 54).

Although the Church had officially outlawed paganism, it would be impossible to repress the spirit of nature. The Church cannot be blamed for all the ecological damage that has occurred over the last 1000 years. However, the Church did play a role in creating a mind set that allowed for this destruction to take place.

The Green Man returns to us now because of the present ecological crisis. His ceaseless essence has always been with us, as God, as myth, and as representational art. We are so disconnected that we seem to have forgotten our way. The Green Man is trying to show us the path.

He is the presence felt in the forest.

He is the pulse of the tide.

He is the soul of nature.

Like the Druids, we must heed the spirit of the trees. Like the Greeks, we must dance with Dionysus. Like the Egyptians, we must do something green. Like the old Europeans, we must embrace and celebrate life. The Green Man waits patiently.

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