

The Mother and the Anima

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Recently, a friend's eight-year-old daughter went to the park with her little "boyfriend." The mother had expressed concerns about the children's safety, but the little gentleman assured her that he could look after her daughter for he had just turned nine-years-old.

Several hours later the two returned, the girl wet from head to toe. "I fell in a current," she said to her mother, referring to a spill into the swollen waters of a little creek. After embraces the mother asked her daughter how she had gotten out of the stream. Before the girl could reply the little boy (wet also, but only to the knees) announced proudly, "I saved her! I saved her!"

The children were delighted. They had had quite the romantic adventure. She had been the damsel-in-distress, he the brave knight. "Did the current sweep you far?" asked the mother in a concerned voice. Again the hero interjected proudly, "She was at least fifty feet away before I got my socks off! I really had to hurry to catch up to her and save her!"

It's a full-time job being a man, but it's overtime being nine-years-old. Loyalties compete. One is accountable to so many things--to one's socks and to one's girl. It is even a bit like being Achilles, the hero of the *Iliad*: one's immortality comes from the mother, but it is flawed at the socks. Indeed, like that legendary hero, whose mother dipped him in the river Styx in the hope of making him immortal (but who remained quite mortal because the heel by which she gripped him was inadvertently withheld from the process), the pre-pubescent boy has a choice between two fates, each only half attractive. He can either have a long childhood without distinction or a short one marked by heroism and glory.

Awakening into consciousness, a boy is torn, or sooner or later will be, between the place his mother touched him to protect him and his own feelings and desires--between the socks his mother dressed him in and the cries of his beloved. What is poignant about the children's adventure at the stream is that the little girl, herself as much "in the mother" as the boy still is, accepts without question the necessity of the boy's maternal loyalties. He is her dashing hero even while he hesitates to remove his socks. He's not only attractive to her; he's the type of guy she can take home to meet her folks. Not only is he her brave rescuer, he's up-front. He'd no sooner pull the wool over anyone's eyes than part with his stockings!

Obviously, our little boy has chosen the fate of a short but glorious childhood. Or perhaps choice is illusionary at such junctures, the heroic code lying latent in one's socks even as a mother's prayer has been said with every stitch. Doubtless, the boy had been duly admonished to save his socks *and* to protect little girls as well.

Another poignancy of this little incident by the stream is that we sense the fatality of our heroic innocent. We know that the glory of the mother's little gentleman will be cut short in coming days. The arrows of Paris-Alexandros, the prince who absconds with his Helen--decadently with his socks left on, will pierce the stockings of the local hero.¹ Already the future looms heavy with foreshadowed doom. Another day in another summer a maiden will be left too long and drown. How many heroes have lost their beloved and failed to heed the call of their own soul through yielding priority to mom? But perhaps when that day comes for our little hero, he will hear the

maiden's cries louder than the mother's and become the rescuer of his own young, virginal values, stockings be damned.

1. In the *Iliad*, of course, it is Paris' arrow that fatally wounds Achilles at his heel.