Like every great work of art, al-Tayyeb Salih’s novel Season of Migration to the North operates on multiple levels of meaning and can be approached from various angles. For example, the impact of colonialism, modernism, and Western ideas on a traditional rural community pervades the novel, and a discussion of this theme would be particularly pertinent in light of the fact that, on several occasions, the character Mustafa Sa‘eed seems to imply a causal relationship between his distorted emotional relationships with English women and the economic, cultural, and psychological violence perpetrated by British colonial rule.

However, in the overall structure and meaning of the novel this theme plays only a supportive part. Much more central is the mythic, archetypal, and psychological significance with which the characters and events are invested. The psychological makeup and development of the two major characters, Mustafa Sa‘eed and the narrator, and the complex relation between them, provide the most reliable index to the novel’s inexhaustible thematic and stylistic suggestiveness. The novel subtly and powerfully contrasts the personalities of the two men and the struggle each wages to master his fate through comprehension of his unconscious being. The one fails, the other succeeds; the one succumbs to the dark unrealized side of his personality, the other, awakened from his illusions by the sufferings of the man he cannot ignore, becomes a whole self, an integrated being, through the process of individuation, and faces the world without fear or deluded hope.

1 (al) Tayeb Salih, Season of Migration to the North, trans. Denys Johnson-Davies (Malta: St. Paul Press, 1970). Quotes from the novel are taken from this edition unless otherwise indicated. Page references follow the quotes in parentheses.

2 The term “individuation” is used in the Jungian sense of “self-fulfillment,” “self-realization,” or “becoming whole” through broadening of consciousness to realize the bipolar potentialities of the self. A fuller understanding of the term will emerge, I hope, from the discussion.
Of the two, Mustafa Sa‘eed especially seems to be instinct with an almost transcendent force and brilliance. The English women who come in sexual contact with him invariably perceive him as a symbol or embodiment of a supernatural force or as an extension of nature itself. He is a pagan god, the devil, the symbol of Africa, the Nile, and tropic climates; his color is the color of darkness and magic. Indeed, he seems to cast a spell on everyone who knows him, including the narrator, for whom from the first meeting he becomes a “phantom” besetting his thoughts and haunting his life. “Mustafa Sa‘eed has, against my will, become a part of my world, a thought in my brain, a phantom that does not want to take itself off”. (50).

Whenever Mustafa Sa‘eed’s name is mentioned or he is remembered, a shift in perception takes place that seems to transcend the bounds of reason and reality. For example, on the train the narrator finds himself sitting opposite the old Mamur who knew Mustafa Sa‘eed:

Once again there was that feeling that the ordinary things before one’s very eyes were becoming unordinary. I saw the carriage window and the door emerge and it seemed to me that the light reflected from the man’s glasses—in an instant that was no longer than the twinkling of an eye—gave off a dazzling flash, bright as the sun at its height. Certainly the world at that moment appeared different also in relation to the retired Mamur in that a complete experience, outside his consciousness, had suddenly come within his reach. When I first saw his face I reckoned him to be in his middle sixties. Looking at him now as he continued to recount his faraway memories, I see a man who is not a day over forty. (51)

And when the narrator describes to an old acquaintance the possessions Mustafa Sa‘eed left behind after his death, the man asks him in bewilderment: “Are you his son?”

He asked me this question though he too was unaware of why he had uttered these words, knowing as he does full well who I am... So, in an instant outside the boundaries of time and place, things appear to him too as unreal. Everything seems probable. He too could be Mustafa Sa‘eed’s son, his brother, or his cousin. The world in that instant, as brief as the blinking of an eyelid, is made up of countless probabilities, as though Adam and Eve had just fallen from Paradise. (56-57)

The narrator’s “instant outside the boundaries of time and place” hints that not only is the personal unconscious of the characters at work, but the collective unconscious as well. The reactions of the narrator, the Mamur, and the narrator’s friend to Mustafa Sa‘eed