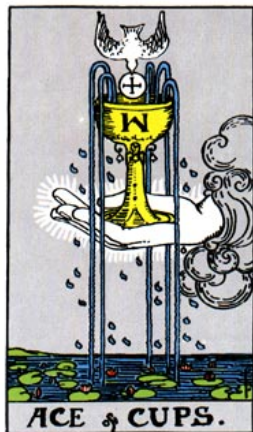


THE SUIT OF CUPS

by Christine Payne-Towler

In the majority of European esoteric Tarots, the suit of Cups refers to the element water. The suit symbol is usually a large drinking cup or communion cup, like the mysterious Grail chalice, occasionally shown pouring forth with holy water or other sacred fluids.

Associations with this cup include the Holy Grail; a fountain of love; the Cornucopia, containing all good things that make us happy; the Krater, stone cup of the Mysteries, containing Soma, psychedelic elixir of mushrooms and cannabis pollen; communion cup of the Catholic Mass; the Pomegranate cup of the Egyptian cult of Isis and the old Hebrew mysteries. It sometimes refers to the Blood Mysteries, symbol of the ultimate sacrifice, whether it's menstrual blood, the blood of a sacrificed animal, or the blood of Christ.



ACE OF CUPS
WAITE DECK

There are times when the cup is also used to symbolize sacred sexuality, with its connotations of merging and bliss. In each case the symbolism reflects the heart of life, bonding and nurturing support, deep soul satisfaction, and becoming one with a greater whole.

Commonly, the Suit of Cups rules the psyche or emotional life, dreamtime, the lunar, tidal, monthly cycles of subjective experience. It refers to all aspects of the inner life, from fantasy and imagination to great heights of ecstasy, deep wells of grief, and the immense calm of spiritual security. This the world of feelings, the heart, our close emotional and spiritual ties. It represents all the ways in which people can be touched and moved in our non-verbal, empathetic, sensitive and intuitive natures.



XXXVIII.
MISTRESS OF CUPS
QUEEN OF CUPS
IBIS DECK

As the imagery implies, the suit of Cups is pregnant with meaning for Western esotericism. This suit has been used to carry the traces of an underground belief held in certain Gnostic Catholic circles in southern Europe about the lineage of a Holy Family founded by Jesus of Nazareth and his wife, Mary Magdalen. According to this belief, Mary of Magdala was taken to Europe along with her child/children after the crucifixion, for their protection during the troubles in Jerusalem. The family settled in southern France, founding a dynasty which eventually rivaled the Roman Church, provoking both the Crusades and the Inquisition as a result of



Rome's attempt to eliminate their influence in Europe.

The queen of Cups is therefore regularly portrayed as the Grail Queen (see *El Gran Tarot Esoterico*), unambiguous icon of the Arthurian legends. If she is being indicated indirectly, she'll become an idealized and dreamy Venus-like figure (see the *Medieval Scapini Tarot*), occasionally, the Black Madonna, patron saint of many villages on the Iberian Peninsula (the *Alexandrian Tarot* decks). Sometimes attributes of all three are present, as in a Black Queen with naked breasts who carries the Pomegranate Cup (*Ibis Tarot*).

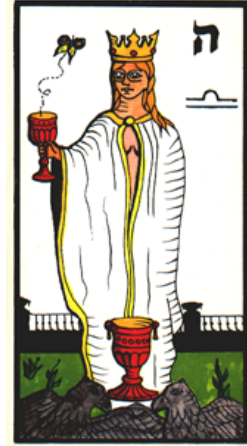
These various guises reveal her role as All-Woman, Sacred Virgin, Lover, and Mother, simultaneously a living woman and a reinvention of the ancient Great Mother, still beloved despite any overlay of patriarchal Christian dogma and symbolism. These Tarot decks are the most likely to imply that the cup is full of blood rather than water.



XXXVII
MASTER OF CUPS
KING OF CUPS
IBIS DECK

Tarot informed with an alchemical theme. This references a person who is actively cultivating spiritual powers (practices which the Roman church strictly anathematized). In those Tarots, the Page is often shown with his cloak draped over his cup or a lid covering its fullness, and with a downcast demeanor. He's

the royal heir, forced to live incognito, banned from his inheritance and his proper role in history. The *Knapp-Hall Tarot* goes to the length of showing his "lineage tree" broken in half behind him.



QUEEN OF CUPS
ESOTERICO DECK

There exists a small group of esoteric Tarot decks that use the suit of Cups to symbolize the element air (the realm of the mind) rather than the element water. These are the Spanish-influenced or Iberian Tarots from Spain, Portugal, and the southern coast of France. These Tarots relocate the Holy Grail away from the sentimental and emotional life, focusing it in the philosophical sphere, the realm of the mind. Here the Cup is a symbol of the Soul's consciousness, receptive and open to Divine Inspiration, experiencing communion with higher planes and higher intelligence. It refers to subtle states of meditation and contemplation, an active, aware receptivity to the Divine Word.

Such Tarots show symbols of the astrological air signs (Gemini, Libra, Aquarius) built into the designs of the royalty of Cups, and will also show a preponderance of butterflies, birds, insects and flowers adorning the suit of Cups, even sometimes extending over the whole deck. They also have a higher percentage of female images in the Major Arcana, with especially suggestive and sympathetic imagery associated with the Devil card. These clues imply contact with the most ancient Hebrew mysteries, carrying Gnostic, Alexandrian, and Moorish influence barely



hidden beneath the ubiquitous Catholicism imposed from Rome.



TWO OF CUPS
ETTEILLA DECK

Examples of this family of Tarots are El Gran Tarot Esoterico, the Salvador Dali Tarot, Euskalherria, Balbi, and the Royal Fez Moroccan. This group of decks is the most colorful, most diverse, and most unexplored school of Tarot represented in the Tarot Magic selection.

Ace of Cups

The Ace of Cups shows a hand holding up an overflowing cup, which fountains forth an endless stream of water, wine, blood, or soma for the people’s refreshment and healing. It is an unending source of balm for body, heart, and soul. It suggests that you can relax into a safety net of love, support, and communion.

Two of Cups

The Two of Cups signifies a union of soul-mates, often with an Adam and Eve theme, traditionally described as a romantic relationship, but implying all partnerships based on affinity and deep mutual understanding. Occasionally it means that your mind and your soul are discovering each other, possibly for the first time.

This card highlights a karmic tie between individuals, portrayed by a wreath or figure-eight ribbon twining around the two cups. Occasionally you see a symbol referring to the union of alchemical opposites (as in sacred sex), portrayed as a long-necked flask wound

about with twined serpents, its mouth spouting flames, sometimes winged. This image is from alchemy, indicating the refining and mutually completing effect of a true and lasting human bond.

Three of Cups

The Three of Cups, often called “consent” or simply “yes,” this card implies a spirit of agreement, mutual support, encouragement, and teamwork. Regularly pictured as three women celebrating their connectedness in a dance with lifted cups, it can be called “sisterhood,” a mutual admiration society. It represents all the benefits of harmonious relationships.

Four of Cups

The Four of Cups refers to a restless time, where a person has become dissatisfied with life, emotionally uncomfortable. Feeling stagnant and longing for change, the heart is questioning its options.



SIX OF CUPS
DALI DECK

Five of Cups

The Five of Cups traditionally portrays the mess that is left after an emotional upheaval, such as a tantrum or fit of rage. Consequences run the gamut from a hangover and lost wages, to abuse and ruined relationships. The title “inheritance” suggests the cross-generational legacy of these tragedies. These same family patterns magnified become war.



Six of Cups

The Six of Cups represents a refreshing openness and innocence, a willingness to learn, and an optimism that things will get better as we grow together in understanding. The traditional title “The Past” reminds us of our original natures, when we were young and enthusiastic, when anything was possible and the future was an open book. We are to remember that this same freshness, those new possibilities, are always with us, even now.

Seven of Cups

The Seven of Cups typically refers to works of the imagination, the use of dream and vision to invent a future different than the life one is

currently living. This card reminds us that our outcomes are not set in stone. We can raise our hopes and expectations and upgrade our results. Do not be fooled by the title “Fantasy,” for this card indicates the magical quality of the awakened imagination.



TEN OF CUPS
DALI DECK

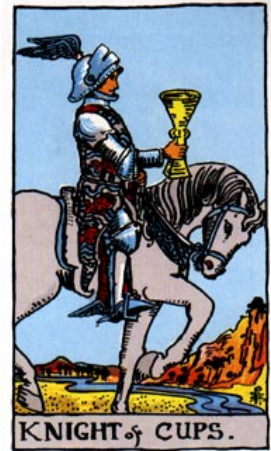
Eight of Cups

The Eight of Cups is often used to signify a great disappointment,

an emotional setback, betrayal, an injury to the heart. Some Tarot decks illustrate this principle by showing a young woman who has just been molested and then cast aside by a stranger passing through her village. His heartless act has left her vulnerable, with potentially drastic consequences to bear. This is a hard card, but a realistic one, warning against misplaced trust and unguarded vulnerability.

Nine of Cups

The Nine of Cups is traditionally called “Happiness.” This card often shows the innkeeper on a Saturday night, doing a brisk business and grinning broadly at the thought of his profits. The rewards are not all monetary, however. This happiness also includes the fulfillment of family and right livelihood, healing and gratitude.



KNIGHT OF CUPS
WAITE DECK

Ten of Cups

The Ten of Cups traditionally signifies family and community, often showing a celebratory scene including many generations, crowned by a rainbow signifying the end of hard times. Love and support extends in all directions, in a grand emotional safety net, inclusive of all.

Page of Cups

The Page of Cups represents a poetic, mystical, emotionally open young person, still tender and idealistic, given to flights of imaginative fantasy. This person is exquisitely refined and fine-tuned, but his sense of groundedness in reality has not yet entirely filled in, so he’s easily tossed about by impersonal forces in the environment. This Page must work to achieve a stronger will and more calculating mind to balance all that sensitivity.

Knight of Cups

The Knight of Cups was usually titled “Homecoming,” indicating the long journey this



Knight has traveled to find his true heart's home. Often he is on a journey of return after long estrangement from all he holds dear. His taste for adventure is exhausted—there is no more romanticizing of battles or travel in strange lands. Now he wants to go where he will be recognized, wanted, welcomed, and where he doesn't have to fight at every turn. He has the attitude of one who is “older and wiser,” the prodigal son.

Queen of Cups

The Queen of Cups is usually portrayed as a feminine, sensitive, vulnerable woman who is supremely understanding and offers unconditional love. She is the classic “feeler,” sometimes to a fault. Her natural empathy and caring expose her to everyone else's emotions and needs. But she occasionally has difficulty identifying her true self-interest in the midst of her responsiveness to others. So sometimes she appears slightly unfocused or perhaps overwhelmed, filled as she is with emotions or “spirits.” She represents the Grail Queen and the Goddess of the Family.

King of Cups

The King of Cups is traditionally portrayed with a watery background, seated on a throne, holding the Cup of Mystery in his hand. Occasionally this cup is fulminating like the mouth of a volcano, emanating light, but never boiling over. The person referred to by this card is so deep that he doesn't need to speak to communicate strength, passion, and commitment. Sometimes he is robed like a priest or shaman. Intense and intuitive, he is a force to be reckoned with.

This chapter is excerpted from Christine Payne-Towler's forthcoming book, *The Underground Stream: Esoteric Tarot Revealed*. To order copies of her book, or to reach Christine for private consultation call 1-800-981-3582.

