

Returns in Astrology

by Bill Herbst

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This week's post is a set-up piece. Although the Pluto Return in any of the various July 4th, 1776 charts used by astrologers to represent the American nation won't be exact until 2022, it gets close enough for horseshoes (meaning within 1°) starting in March of this year. So, it seems prudent to write a short post explaining what a "Return" is in astrology. Think of this as setting the stage or pouring a foundation.

In astrology, the "Return" of any planet or other moving body in the solar system used as a symbol in a chart is really very simple and straightforward.

Every planetary symbol in a chart occupies a precise position in the ecliptic — which is the projection as a flat plane in space of the earth's relatively circular orbit around the sun. The ecliptic is typically termed the Zodiac, with its twelve equal 30° sections of arc, each of which is called a Sign (Aries, Taurus, Gemini, etc.) This archetypal Zodiac of Signs is but one of numerous interpretive levels in technical astrology — and not the most important — but it's pretty much the entirety of kindergarten-level, lowest-common-denominator popular astrology. In fact, the only thing that most of the public knows about personal astrology is the Sign through which the Sun was passing at an individual's birth. Supposedly, or so the dumbed-down marketing aimed at mass consumption would lead people to believe, that's *your* Sign.

Of course, the notion that one "is" an Aries or a Cancer just because the Sun was passing through that Sign at birth is utter foolishness. Heck, I've been railing against such idiocy for 50 years. (If one more person says to me, "*My son is a Taurus*," as if that tells me something meaningful, I think I'll scream. It's like saying, "*My son is an American*.") Every chart contains ALL the archetypes — Planets, Signs, and Houses — in varying proportions and degrees of emphasis. Beyond that, charts are charts, while people are people, and never the twain shall meet. Mixing them up is a bad mistake. But this commentary isn't about that. It's about astrological Returns.

A "Return" in astrology occurs when any astronomical moving body used symbolically in astrology has made one complete circuit through all twelve Signs of the Zodiac and returns to a specific starting point. The heavenly markers that define the four seasons in the northern hemisphere (spring, summer, autumn, and winter) by the Sun's arrival at 0° of each corresponding Cardinal Sign (Aries, Cancer, Libra, or Capricorn) are Returns. Of course, those seasons are reversed in the southern hemisphere, but the measurement yardstick holds.

The same applies to each planetary position in a natal chart. A "Solar Return" occurs once each year when the Sun returns to its precise natal position. That's called a "birthday." Some astrologers erect complete Solar Return charts for each individual that purport to describe symbolically the next year in the person's life. *[Note: I don't use Solar Return charts for various reasons, mainly inexactitude and uncertainty, but that's neither here nor there — the technique remains common in astrology.]*

Each moving body in astrology has its own period for a Return. For the Sun, it's once a year. For the Moon, it's every month. Mercury and Venus are a bit weird, since they jitterbug through the zodiac forward and back, but always close to the Sun. Below are the approximate periods for Returns of the other major planets:

Mars.....2 years
Jupiter..... 12 years
Saturn 29 years
Uranus 84 years
Neptune 165 years
Pluto 245 years

All Returns are restarts that mark significant boundaries — endings and beginnings, before and after. They're do-overs — back to Square One, but with more experience to inform and guide us. We approach some life-process in an underlying fashion for awhile, then we begin again, older and (we hope) wiser. The symbolic associations of a particular planet always remain the same in any given natal chart, but our forms of understanding, emotional experience, and behavioral expression may shift from one Return period to the next, as will the life-circumstances that influence us within each cycle.

Mars Returns typically occur every 25 months, just slightly more than two years. They signal restarts in the realms of desire, assertion, and conflict — what we want to go after and how we pursue it, what makes us hot and how we express desire, where we are combative and how. The symbolism in each life behind all these motivations doesn't change from one Mars cycle to another, but the form does. A four-year-old doesn't want the same things as a 40-year-old. On the other hand, the more things change, the more they stay the same. And so it goes — we change and we don't.

In a human life, three Saturn Returns are possible, at age 29, 58, and 87. Along with birth, the first two Saturn Returns mark the beginning/ending of the three major acts or chapters in life: 1. childhood, 2. adulthood, and 3. elderhood. Each chapter defines a different general tone for and approach to living in our bodies in the material world of people and society. How we experience and understand our limitations, responsibilities, and necessities change from one act to the next, sometimes dramatically.

Jupiter Returns are different. With a 12-year period, Jupiter Returns in astrology mark evolving cycles of social development, opportunity, and self-expression,

helping us realign to wherever the doorways for possible growth may be. These shifts occur at age 12, 24, 36, 48, 60, 72, and 84. Keep in mind, however, that the tone of the 12-year period is more important than just the year of the shift.

Uranus Returns occur at age 83-85 and generally signal a shift away from involvement with the world. We're leaving and we know it. Very few people continue to participate in the hustle-bustle of the social beehive after their mid-80s. Instead, it's off to the monastery and seclusion.

For individual humans, Neptune and Pluto Returns don't happen. We just don't live long enough. We may, however, reach the halfway point. For Neptune, that always occurs in the early 80s. Curiously, the halfway point in a complete Pluto cycle isn't 122 years (half of 245). Because Pluto's orbit is so elliptical, the halves will tend to be long then short, or short then long. For those of us born during Pluto's faster movement through the Zodiac, which is the case for most of us who are alive today, we actually have a shot at reaching the halfway mark if we live to a ripe old age.

Where Neptune and Pluto Returns might be significant, however, is in the lives of national entities. Countries, basically. We don't have "natal charts" for all nations or cultures, of course, because the beginnings of countries are often impossible to pinpoint. China is an ancient culture that dates back thousands of years, but modern China — what was once derisively called "Red China" — has a definite beginning in 1949. So, that's the chart astrologers use for China.

America (meaning the United States) has its roots back in the European discovery and colonization of the New World (1492), but the specific entity of the U.S. formally began in the late-18th century, with the signing in Philadelphia on July 4th, 1776, of the Declaration of Independence from England being the date of choice for most astrologers. Charts for other dates are used — for the Articles of Confederation or the ratification of the Constitution — but, by and large, most astrologers use some version of the July 4th, 1776, chart. The difference from one July 4th chart to another is in the time of day used as the "birth moment."

Most nations currently existing are much younger than America. The chaos of the 20th century's two World Wars changed the map dramatically. So, even if we think of America as a young or even immature culture, from the astrological perspective of national birth-charts we are an old country — old enough to be coming up on our Pluto Return. Let's see, 1776 plus 245 years equals... Why, that's 2021! And it's exactly what the ephemeris tells us.

Is our upcoming national Pluto Return similar in tone to a person's Saturn Return? Does it mark a new beginning into greater maturity? Is it dangerous or destructive? What can we expect? Those are among numerous questions I'll try to address in commentaries over the coming year.

For now, just be assured that America's Pluto Return is a Very Big Deal in astrology. And it's already underway...