

“Desindividuation” in Blake’s “A Poison Tree”: A Jungian Perspective

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Abstract

According to the psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung, literature, like dreams and myths, could be an outlet for the unconscious drives—personal and collective. William Blake’s “A Poison Tree” is a case in point. The incidents in the poem, aesthetically, uncover a range of dynamic factors that constitute human inner personality such as Shadow, Persona, Trickster, Anima and Animus. According to Jung, these archetypes ought to be realized by the ego—the conscious part of the psyche. Only then, a person could reach a state of wholeness and self-realization—“individuation”. To give the reader an insight into the value of this psychic harmony and balance, the poem, paradoxically, performs a mental situation in which the psyche undergoes a state of “desindividuation”, wherein the ego is weak, unbalanced and driven by autonomous energies. The study, however, through the analysis of the metaphoric and symbolic structure of the poem, will demonstrate, as Jung believes, that the psyche is not static; its paradoxical mechanisms could, yet, interplay and reach a synthesizing phase.

Keywords

Carl Gustav Jung, “Desindividuation”, The Unconscious, Archetypes, Self-Realization

1. Introduction

From a Jungian perspective, human psyche—spirit, soul or mind—is that power that could envelop one’s thoughts, feelings and behavior, whether conscious or unconscious. At the same time, it could regulate and adapt the individual to the external world. “What he [a person] must do throughout his life span, Jung says, is to develop this inherent wholeness... and to guard against its breaking up into separate, autonomous, and conflicting systems” (Hall & Nordby, 1973: p, 33).

This innate process towards wholeness, this ideal state wherein latent potentials are actualized, and all elements of one's unconscious are brought into consciousness and integrated harmoniously into one's personality structure, is what Jung calls individuation. On the other hand, I use the word "desindividuation" to refer to a state in which a person's ego—consciousness—ignores the dynamics of the unconscious levels or is not motivated to discover them and differentiate them. Consequently, the psychic components—consciousness, personal unconscious and collective unconscious, remain disintegrated. Many aspects of the unconscious, therefore, continue to be unknown to the ego, broken, autonomous and even destructive.

As the unconscious part of the psyche is unknown, its constituents, Jung believes, could be manifested through dreams, myths, art... etc. He confirms that "Art is a kind of innate drive that seizes a human being and makes him its instrument. The artist is not a person endowed with free will, who seeks his own ends, but one who allows art to realize its purposes through him" (Sreekumar, 2017). A poet, then, is not a mere individual but a "collective man." (2017) Based on this assumption, this study selects one of William Blake's poems, "A poison Tree" in order to analyze how this text, metaphorically, dramatizes an experience of "desindividuation", in which the archetypes, particularly, Shadow, Persona, Trickster, being unrealized, turn to be destructive. Taking the poem as a symbolic texture, the discussion will go further to illustrate the splits within human psyche, particularly that between the ego and the "inner voice." Yet, these opposed factors, as Jung believes, and as the textual analysis will demonstrate, could be synthesized and metamorphosed into a harmoniously integrated self.

2. "Desindividuation" in "A Poison Tree"

2.1. "A Poison Tree" as a Visionary Art

Jung divides the work of art into two categories: The "psychological" and the "visionary". Psychological art "deals with materials drawn from the realm of human consciousness" (Sreekumar, 2017). It represents those things that are experienced and understood by human psyche. Real experiences, such as the moral lessons of life, the emotional setbacks, the experience of passion and crisis of human destiny, fall within this realm. Visionary art, on the other hand, is "A primordial experience which surpasses man's understanding" (Sreekumar, 2017). Jung, then, enlarges the scope the artists; they go further to create something that touches human collective unconsciousness. According to Jung, all people share residual primordial memories and experiences from the processes of evolution. Much in the same way physical attributes are carried forward, so are attributes of the psyche. He uses the term the collective unconscious to signify this notion and he suggests that it is a source of great poetry (Sreekumar, 2017).

Based on this concept of poetry, one could list Blake's "A poison Tree" among

visionary arts, performing, through its metaphoric and symbolic fabric, the dynamics of Shadow, Persona, Trickster which Jung considers as archetypes, common to all individuals and could be manifested in human behavior. The shadow, for example, is clearly dramatized in the poem:

2.2. The Dynamics of the Shadow

The notion of shadow can be derived right from the beginning of the poem, “A Poison Tree”:

I was angry with my friend;
 I told my wrath; my wrath did end.
 I was angry with my foe:
 I told it not, my wrath did grow.

 And I watered it in fears,
 Night & morning with my tears:
 And I sunned it with smiles,
 And with soft deceitful wiles.

 And it grew both day and night.
 Till it bore an apple bright.
 And my foe beheld it shine,
 And he knew that it was mine.

 And into my garden stole,
 When the night had veiled the pole;
 In the morning glad I see;
 My foe outstretched beneath the tree. (Blake)

The first thing to be underlined in this poem is the lines of the first stanza that introduce the problematic situation in the poem:

I was angry with my foe:
 I told it not, my wrath did grow.

The speaker cannot express his anger to his enemy. As there is no outlet for this rough emotion, it dives into the personal unconscious, the hidden side of a human being wherein such emotions could flourish and develop into autonomous energies. This dark space is what Jung calls the shadow.

Moreover, referring to the other as a “foe” connotes that the speaker’s psyche has already been subject to an accumulation of negative attitudes towards this person. The sense of anger, therefore, finds a fertilized underground—personal unconscious—to grow in. In a metaphoric style, this growth is dramatized through a gradual cultivation of an apple tree. The pronoun “it”, then, implies that the tree is detached from the conscious “I”, as it incarnates an unconscious growth of wrath. Furthermore, the speaker’s “fears” and “tears” show his belief that the other, being a foe, is dangerous and could be harmful, unaware that these negative qualities are growing in his own dark side which he ignores. This

is the speaker's complex; it is this chasm that separates consciousness from the unconscious and which has a negative impact on his psyche. As long as he has not yet reflected on and scrutinized this internal negative side, he cannot control the outcome of the growing monster—revenge: The ending is, inevitably, a fatal incident, the demolition of the foe. One can ask the following question: Why does this unconscious activity—this swelling wrath—burst into an external act, a crime? To answer the question, it is worth discussing the active role of the Persona.

2.3. The Dynamics of the Persona

Persona is the social mask worn by a person, showing a false identity that adapts the latter into the external situation, and through which his/her unconscious mechanisms could affect the other indirectly. Explaining how one could be imprisoned within the constraints of the persona, Sylvie Ducretot says:

Nous pouvons continuer toute notre vie à nous identifier à notre persona, à notre masque, celui que nous portons pour l'extérieur, et nous continuerons d'être des masques, seulement des masques. Pour être authentiquement libre dans nos limites essentielles et humaines, il faut parvenir à être soi-même (Ducretot, 2021: p. 14).

That is to say, we can continue throughout our lives to identify with our persona, to our mask, the one we wear for the outside, and we will continue to be masks, only masks. To be truly free within our essential and human limits, we must achieve to be ourselves.

The persona is represented in the poem through the speaker's "smiles". Smiles, that are suggesting forgiveness, kindness and good will, are, however, just a mask that adapts the speaker into social interaction. Being incongruent to his deep negative feelings, the smiles become dangerous; they are luring the enemy to be so confident that he dares approach the garden and taste its fruit. The poisonous apple is paradoxical: its 'bright' form stands for the persona; whereas, its poison symbolizes the invisible and negative energies of the unconscious. Such a mask justifies how the "I" could be manipulated by the persona. The "I" in this situation turns too weak to differentiate internal energies. This powerful dominance of the persona implies its being energized by another archetype: The trickster.

2.4. The Dynamics of the Trickster

"The trickster is a collective shadow figure," says Jung, "a summation of all the inferior traits of character in individuals. And since the individual shadow is never absent as a component of personality, the collective figure can construct itself out of it continually" (Jung, 2003: p. 177). In the poem, the phrase "soft deceitful wiles" mirrors the trickster's deep cunning and manipulating stratagems. The wiles are "soft," for the Persona succeeds in hiding their vulgarity. This situation is the climactic moment of deindividuation—when psychic ele-

ments are widely opposed.

2.5. The Dynamics of the Anima and Animus

Historically, the apple tree has been associated with man-woman relationship: love, seduction, temptation... This reference to man and woman, from a Jungian perspective, could raise the notions of anima and animus which are the powers that have great impact on both sexes. These deep psychic elements, unlike the shadow, are not clearly manifested in the poem, a fact which indicates that they are not easily realized as Jung himself declared:

“Though the shadow is a motif as well known to mythology as anima and animus, it represents first and foremost the personal unconscious, and its content can therefore be made conscious without too much difficulty. In this it differs from anima and animus, for whereas the shadow can be seen through and recognized fairly easily, the anima and animus are much further away from consciousness and in normal circumstances are seldom if ever realized” (Eternalized, 2022).

Being archetypes, the anima and animus functionality is not restricted to the people in the poem but transcends the framework of the text. Anima, its being negative or positive, depends on a man’s experiences with the opposite sex, beginning with his mother. Animus impact, however, depends on a woman’s relationship with her father. The apple tree, therefore, does not only reflect the shadow; it also triggers the reader’s reflection on the archetypes that are deeper than the shadow.

3. Towards Individuation

To amplify deeper the poem, it is not only the tree which is an incarnation of or a hint to psychic activities, but the whole text could be taken, symbolically, as a psychological process. We have seen how the “I” represents the ego, and how this conscious part of the self, being mesmerized by the persona, fails to realize how wrath grows into a revengeful and destructive power. Indeed, the foe could represent, too, the speaker’s inner voice—inner foe. From a Jungian perspective, one’s negative attitudes towards others may be mere projection of one’s inner flaws. That is, ignoring the contents of their shadow and make no effort to inquire into this psychic part, people unconsciously project certain profound attitudes onto people with whom they interact. Enmity, being attributed to another person, is indeed a reflection of the speaker’s inner foe that he ignores and refuses to open a dialogical interaction with: “I told it not.” This Luck of communication, which widens the chasm between two opposed psychic constituents: the ego and the inner voice—the conscious element and the unconscious element, could impede the process of individuation—self-realization.

Being too extroverted, too involved with external life, too obsessed with his persona—the mask of his social life, the speaker seems to be happy social-

ly—“smiles”. On the other hand, he has ignored his inner voice, till it becomes unfamiliar, strange and uncanny, a fact which raises his “fears” and “tears.” Ignoring the introversion process enlarges the gap between the “I” and the inner voice. The growth of wrath, incarnated in the form of a poisoned tree, does, finally, “kill” the inner voice which turns to be engraved in the unknown realm: the unconscious.

Fortunately, the psychic constituents, according to Jung, are subject to metamorphosis, and thus could gradually undergo the process of rebirth. Defining this genre of transformation, Jung maintains that “rebirth (renovation)... that is to say, rebirth within the span of individual life... may be a renewal without any change of being, inasmuch as the personality which is renewed is not changed in its essential nature, but only its functions, or parts of the personality, are subjected to healing, strengthening, or improvement” (Jung, 2003: pp. 54-55).

Consequently, the foe that sounds to be destroyed, or rather alienated, could be resurrected in the form of a friend once the ego manages to communicate with this neglected yet important factor. The inner voice, its being a foe or a friend, depends on the individual as Jung confirms: “We should prefer to be always “I” and nothing else. But we are confronted with that inner friend or foe, and whether he is friend or our foe depends on ourselves” (Jung, 2003: p. 76).

It is, therefore, possible, through communication between the ego and the inner voice that their opposed concerns could settle at a synthesizing point. This act is stated in the first stanza; we are informed that communication takes place between the “I” and the friend, “I told my wrath”; consequently, the wrath, which suggests a rough dispute, is declared to be over: “My wrath did end.” The friendship, relating the speaker to the other, represents, symbolically, the harmony between the two parts of the psyche—the conscious and the unconscious. In this regard, Jung has this to say

It is the representation of a friendship between two men which is simply the outer reflection on an inner fact: it reveals our relationship to that inner friend of the soul into whom Nature herself would like to change us—that other person who we also are and yet can never attain too completely (Jung, 2003: p. 76).

Nonetheless, for the inner voice to be transformed into a friend is neither an easy procedure, nor is it a permanent state. This is manifested in the structure of the poem. Notice that the interaction between the “I” and the friend is presented in two lines; whereas that between the “I” and the foe is narrated in fourteen lines. This longest narrative has a great role in the text; it sheds light on the complexities of the unconscious realm and its dark energies. In doing so, it drives one to grasp the value of the shorter incident. In one of his interviews, explaining Jung’s basic concepts, Frederic Lenoire says that Jung takes alchemy as a symbol of the psychic dynamics, in that he considers alchemy of human being, namely human psyche, as a process of transmuting iron into gold. This echoes Jung’s belief that one does not become luminous by looking at light but only

when one goes through one's own darkness (Lenoire, 2022).

Moreover, the brevity of the positive experience suggests, as Jung believes, that the psychic tranquility and balance is not permanent. To put it in other words, being summed up and structured in a parallel form—in the first stanza—the two incidents draw the reader's attention to the idea that human psychic development is based not only on a constant positive state of mind but basically on continuous dialectics between the positive and negative experiences, between accuracy and flaws, between the conscious and the unconscious. It is this fluctuating psychodynamic activity, according to Jung, which energizes a person's psyche, for it contributes to developing, integrating and harmonizing and—above all—synthesizing the diverging flows of the differing constituents and thus maintaining the individuals strive towards the fulfilment of self-realization.

4. Conclusion

The poem, "A Poison Tree," metaphorically, incarnates and hints at Jungian major archetypes: Shadow, Persona, Trickster, Anima and Animus. The implicit interaction among the speaker's shadow, persona and trickster strengthens the negative drives that transform, metaphorically, his wrath into a poisonous tree that kills the enemy. Additionally, the reference to the apple tree which usually alludes to man and woman relationship—love, seduction, redemption...—raises the psychic notions: anima and animus. Being archetypes, these two factors and their functions transcend the limits of the text, for they are the traits of all mankind.

To enlarge the scope of analysis, the study moves from a metaphoric analysis of the tree to a discussion of the symbolic structure of the poem as a whole. This latter dimension reveals how the conscious "I" and the unconscious "inner voice" are presented as opposed phenomena—the "I" and the foe. On the other hand, they are presented as friends when the "I" expresses its wrath. Being structured in such a paradoxical way, the two incidents reiterate the view that the ego, while oscillating between positive and negative energies, could motivate the psychic development; such a dialectic interaction could result into self-realization and transform subconscious constituents into fuels that empower the ego.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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