

ARCHETYPES AND ARCHETYPAL SYMBOLS IN *THE LITTLE PRINCE*: A PSYCHOANALYTIC VIEW ON THE WORK OF ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY

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Abstract: In 1943, when World War II was in full roar, a period marked by atrocities and actual degeneration of the human spirit, the Reynald and Hitchcock in New York published the fantastic tale *The Little Prince*. Its author, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, a fierce enemy of the Nazis, was engaged in the war, living fully the horrors of the conflagration as a reconnaissance pilot flying missions in the GR II/33 squadron of the Armée de l’Air. What I would like to put forth in this essay is a new and original point of view from an anthropological but also psychoanalytic perspective on the tale, namely an exposition of the main archetypal motifs identified in this poignant declaration of love and friendship. One of the most important questions that come to mind is: How the aviator and war participant Antoine de Saint-Exupéry is the author of this tale? Why did the book appear exactly at that time, in full-blown war? And yet another important aspect: How was *The Little Prince* received by the public and transformed into what it is today: the most translated book in the French language? Last but not least, why does this tale touch us so?

Keywords: *The Little Prince*, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, psychoanalysis, regression, archetypes and archetypal symbols, Freud, Jung

SIGMUND FREUD OR CARL GUSTAV JUNG?

In my attempt to identify the psychoanalytic mechanisms behind the publication of the tale *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry – surfacing like a flower in a land dried up by the horrors of war – I shall resort to the Jungian method in order to establish the archetypes and the archetypal symbols, and to the Freudian method to “scan” the author’s personal subconscious.

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The theory referring to the human *psyche* is substantiated by Sigmund Freud, who distinguishes between three stages of the personality: the 'Id' (the impulsive part of the psyche), the 'Ego' (the part that commands and controls the psyche) and the 'Super-Ego' (or the "upper unconscious", the moralism in action). The Id is the most primitive component of the psyche, the most elementary aspect of the personality, consisting of instinctive drives, true biological forces that constantly tend to overlaps in the sphere of the conscious.

If the personal unconscious is a repository of repressions confined here ever since childhood, the Ego – meaning the consciousness, is the instance characterized by volitive control, whereas the Super-Ego - meaning super-control, is the realm of values, ideals, norms and interdictions, in a word, of moral representations, at times even turning to self-censorship. If Sigmund Freud considered that the unconscious exists only on an individual basis, Carl Gustav Jung nuances this idea by suggesting that the personal unconscious represents only a superficial layer covering the true unconscious, the collective one, which already means a common "database".

THE FREUDIAN PERSPECTIVE

The ever-closer death, the acute, full-fledged feeling - emphasized by the spirituality of those times - of reaffirmation of human values such as love and friendship, alienated during the atrocity-ridden war period, but also the feeling of reestablishing human dignity and freedom, trigger complex psychological mechanisms that help Antoine de Saint-Exupéry introduce us to the *Little Prince* fantasy world.

This is, in fact, just as Sigmund Freud points out, the terrible fight between Thanatos and Eros, between the destructive and the creative instincts. In a critical moment, when the drives of death and destruction seem to submerge the entire world, the creative Eros returns in full force, trying to defeat the forces of darkness.

For Sigmund and Anna Freud, the defense mechanisms represent a complexity of processes which operate in order to protect the ego against drives, by attempting to ward off only the resulting drives and not the exterior event that is likely to cause them.

Along with the desexualization of the subconscious, the concept of "defense mechanism" evolves, so that the said complexity of processes may avert not only the derivative internal drives, but also the overwhelming external stimuli, which can breed these drives.

Vasile Dem Zamfirescu considers that the defense is a process through which the consciousness is protected from the dangerous conflict internal stimuli and from powerful external stimuli, potential traumatic (Zamfirescu, 280).

REGRESSION OR HOW DID THE AUTHOR COME UP WITH THE IDEA OF THE "LITTLE PRINCE"?

The moment when this poignant fantasy novella was published is very intriguing. Why did it happen exactly then, which were the psychological conditions and mechanisms that determined the issue of this wonderful book?

The most important psychological mechanism that led to the appearance of this novella is, in my opinion, regression, a complexity of psychological processes that help Antoine de Saint-Exupéry lead us into the fantastical world of the "Little Prince".

According to Vasile Dem Zamfirescu, the regression is the psychological process through which an individual or collective subject returns to an earlier stage of psychological development, be it in thought, feeling or behaviour (Zamfirescu, 288).

For Sigmund Freud, regression is closely linked to instinct. It is not until the post-Freudian psychoanalysis stage that the theory of this complex defense mechanism shall be developed in other areas than that of sexuality.

We can identify the two types of regression on which *The Little Prince* was based:

a. Temporal regression – the author pays special attention to an earlier period of time, that of a happy childhood, thus avoiding the current psychic conflicts, the most important of which being generated by his need to actively take part in the war and, respectively, the inherent psychic cleavage that this need prompted.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry had a happy childhood and whenever he felt threatened by real life problems such as the virulence and repercussions of war, or when he felt death standing close by, the glow of this genuine *illo tempore aurea* spent at an aunt's house (from his mother's side) in Saint Maurice de Rémois, or at his grandmother's (from his father's side) in La Môle, would erupt from the unconscious.

Another example of temporal regression generated from a generalized psychic conflict is presented in the film *Joyeux Noël* (2005), based on a real event that occurred during World War I. The French and German soldiers are presented in the trenches, standing

face to face, very close to one another, after weeks of fighting on the same lines, in harsh winter conditions. On Christmas Eve 1914, French and German soldiers alike, let themselves be enraptured by the Christmas atmosphere and its charm, leaving the trenches and celebrating together, like brothers. A deeply moving defense psychic reaction to inner drives that push towards survival no matter what, even if the price to pay is too high: kill or be killed.

In that place among the trenches, while the war was well under way, for a brief moment Eros took over Thanatos. But, as said by Freud, Eros is ambivalent.

b. The topical regression. I would like to go back now to the story of *The Little Prince* and its publication. The second type of regression, the topical regression, makes the subject daydream in order to help him escape the harsh reality he is confronted with - the inevitable times he is living in. He is transposed to another space, a familiar and near place where he probably felt the joy and fear of self-rediscovery – the desert. This is the place he discovered following a plane crash; a place through which he roamed for days on end before being able to return to the airbase.

In *The Little Prince*, the creative act, in the Freudian sense, namely the Eros, manifests itself both in the fair child's relationship to his flower, and also in the unexpected encounter between the aviator and the child, marked by the gift of friendship and love towards mankind.

The destructive act, Thanatos, appears both in the moment of the little prince's death, at the end of the story, as well as during his previous encounters, without any creative effect, with the inhabitants of the other planets he visits.

Thus, we can talk about an impulsive ambivalence Eros-Thanatos, which, aside from essential differences, have something in common: the little prince's death will reunite him with his beloved flower and, furthermore, it will keep him forever alive in his friend's memory.

THE JUNGIAN PERSPECTIVE

At first, one of the most important friends and disciples of Sigmund Freud, also considered to be the latter's favourite within the International Psychoanalytical Association, Carl Gustav Jung would eventually part with his mentor in 1913, following the International Psychoanalytical Congress in Munich.

They parted on account of their disagreements over the subject of psychoanalysis: Freud would claim that the sexual theory derived from

psychoanalysis is an “unassailable bastion against the black avalanche of the occult”, and by “occult” he meant philosophy, religion and parapsychology (a new branch), while Carl Gustav Jung regarded these fields of study as high-potential ground for psychoanalysis.

Carl Gustav Jung's theory, according to which the personal unconscious is nothing but a very thin “layer” that “covers” the collective unconscious, as well as his analyses on alchemy and religion, would constitute the final divergent point between the two psychoanalytical currents.

The psychoanalyst philosopher's theory states that the archetypes are pre-existent forms of a collective nature, confined in the collective unconscious and unable to enter consciousness unless mediated. They represent the *geist* that would confer *form* to the contents of consciousness – the archetypal symbols.

Jung defines the archetypes of the collective unconscious as follows:

The concept of the archetype, which is an indispensable correlate to the idea of the collective unconscious, indicates the existence of definite forms in the psyche which seem to be present always and everywhere. (...) This collective unconscious does not develop individually, but is inherited. It consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily and which give definite form to certain psychic contents (Jung, 43).

THE MAIN ARCHETYPES AND ARCHETYPAL SYMBOLS IDENTIFIED IN *THE LITTLE PRINCE*

The archetypes of the collective unconscious “surface” through adjacent archetypal symbols, subsequent, in crisis situations, in which they can bring about the much sought-after “peace” offered by a solution, peace that the consciousness searched for, but to no avail. The transposition of these archetypal symbols, their “introduction” in the conscious mind, can be achieved either through dreaming, considered by Sigmund Freud as the “Royal Way” of access into the unconscious, or through “cultural transfer” in works of art. I choose to name this process “cultural transfer” instead of “sublimation”, as I find the first term more complex.

The tale of *The Little Prince* presents elements specific to fairytales: flowers and animals with human attributes, able to talk and to possess feelings and common sense. The alteration of plant proportions that the little prince encounters is specific to the immersion in the unconscious

mind, where time and space become relative. The little prince keeps intact all the characteristics of childhood, which he successfully transfers to the only interlocutor who truly understands him, the author himself, and the one who will become his only friend. The language is also characteristic to childhood: direct, familiar, naïve and charming. The child keeps his childlike wonder before all the miracles he stumbles upon, as well as his trust in everything that surrounds him – thus baffling even the snake, symbol of Evil, which, under the child’s influence, changes fundamentally (a change wonderfully described by the author):

He twined himself around the little prince’s ankle, like a golden bracelet.

- Whomever I touch, I send back to the earth from whence he came, the snake spoke again. But you are innocent and true, and you come from a star... (Saint- Exupéry, 40).

Influenced by the little prince’s ingenuity, the snake changes, just like Judas did, from an agent of Evil to an amorphous vehicle of destiny fulfillment. From the very beginning of the book, from the dedication to Léon Werth, “this grown-up understands everything, even books about children” (Saint- Exupéry, 3), Antoine de Saint-Exupéry depicts, through antithesis, the profile of the callous adult, who doesn’t remember his childhood, nor its magic.

THINGS ARE NOT WHAT THEY SEEM

As a child, at the age of 9, while flicking through a book about virgin forests, the author stumbles upon a drawing of a boa constrictor swallowing a wild beast. He then draws a boa constrictor swallowing an elephant. His drawing frightens no one, as adults are no longer capable of seeing life through child’s eyes. Something, which for the child-author represents an entire visualized drama, enframed in a drawing, for an adult it represents nothing more than an ordinary hat.

Later on, as an adult and aviator, the author undergoes a flying incident and must land in the Sahara desert. After the first night, as he awakens, a child greets him and asks him to draw a sheep for him.

The little prince is the first and one of the most important archetypal symbols in this tale: *the Child archetype*.

According to Carl Gustav Jung, the ‘Child archetype’ does not represent a residue of the memories linked to individual childhood; but

the child motif represents the preconscious, childhood aspect of the collective psyche (Jung, 161).

Whereas the archetype is universal, the archetypal image is individual - the shape that is unique to each and every one of us, filled with the archetypal content.

Back to *The Little Prince*: Astonished by the child's presence in the desert and also by his request, the author sketches for him his own favourite drawing from his childhood. He is surprised when the child readily recognizes what he had drawn: an elephant swallowed by a boa constrictor; and he continues claiming his dear sheep. The author joins the game, that of childhood, and makes several drawings of the sheep, which the little prince rejects claiming that in the first drawing the sheep is sick, in the second the sheep is actually a ram, and in the third one it is too old. Having no time to lose, as he also had to repair his plane, the author draws a box, claiming that the sheep is inside. To his surprise, the little prince is satisfied, which denotes the fact that what the child was looking for was not a drawing, but the involvement of his conversation partner in this game of imagination.

In the loneliness of the desert, the author rediscovers not only the magic of the childhood play but also the child's need - a general human need for that really matters - (of) having a friend. Slowly, he lets himself engage more and more into the magical world of his long-gone childhood. "Once upon a time there was a little prince who lived on a planet that was scarcely any bigger than himself, and who had need of a friend..." (Saint- Exupéry, 12).

And, step by step, the little prince starts opening up, telling the author about his fantastical planet and also about his flower, endowed with the gift of speech, feeling and common sense, a flower that he attended to daily and with which he had developed a special relationship.

At this point, the second most important archetypal symbol of the tale appears: the flower - symbol of *the Anima archetype*.

The Anima represents the feminine dimension, unconscious, present within every man and made up of multiple layers:

- the first layer represents the phylogenetic heritage, "the collective image of the female";
- the second layer represents the male's feminine side;
- the third layer, a superficial one, is made up of the individual's present-day personal experiences. (Jung, 3)

In my opinion, in the case of little prince, the archetype is confined to its second stage of personal growth, namely the one of his feminine side.

Indeed, the passion and abnegation the little prince displays in order to take care of his beloved flower speak for themselves. To prevent the flower from catching a cold, the little prince covers it daily with a bell jar – the consciousness that always “covers” our *anima* to keep it safe from harm.

Endowed with magical powers like the gift of speech, feeling and common sense, the flower in the story strikingly resembles Antoine de Saint Exupéry’s wife. Is it a coincidence? I believe not. It is only a transposition of the author’s archetypal symbol of the anima through cultural transfer.

The prince is disappointed when he finds a garden with thousands of flowers similar to his own – a flower that praised itself on being unique in the whole universe. “I thought that I was rich, with a flower that was unique in the world; and all I have is a common rose.” (Saint-Exupéry, 44).

Enter the fox, the third most important archetypal symbol of the story – archetypal symbol of *the Spirit archetype* (of meaning).

But what exactly is the archetype of the spirit? This is how Carl Gustav Jung defines it:

...the old man (archetypal symbol of the spirit archetype) saves him the trouble of making up his mind. Indeed, the old man is himself this purposeful reflection and concentration of moral and physical forces that come about spontaneously in the psychic space outside consciousness when conscious thought is not yet – or is no longer – possible. The concentration and tension of psychic forces have something about them that always looks like magic: they develop an unexpected power of endurance which is often superior to the conscious effort of will. (Saint- Exupéry, 219)

In my opinion, one of the four most important characters in the story, the fox explains to the little prince that the difference between his flower (his anima) and the rest of the flowers (other people’s representations of the anima archetype) is that his flower is “tamed”.

What exactly does it mean to be “tamed”? To my mind, from a philosophical point of view, here lies the keystone of the whole story.

The archetype of the spirit, through its archetypal image, the fox, lets the little prince know that to be tamed means “to create bonds”

between two distinct elements, so that if those bonds are not created, the two elements remain strangers to one another. It is what us, people, achieve through socializing and, afterwards, in our couple, through the symbolic union between the 'anima and the animus'.

In fact, the theriomorphic representation of the spirit archetype teaches the little prince and, along with him, teaches us all, what wonderful gifts love and friendship truly are:

“One only understands the things that one tames,” said the fox. “Men have no more time to understand anything. They buy things ready-made in shops. But there is no shop anywhere where one can buy friendship, and so men have no friends anymore. If you want a friend, tame me...” (Saint- Exupéry, 47)

After the fox asks three times the little prince to tame it, at the end it unravels its secret to him: “It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.” (*Ibidem*, 48)

It is neither the common sense, nor the consciousness, but only the unconscious that is close to the truth, and only children, with their pure and free unconscious, can find it – this is what *The Little Prince* so admirably makes us understand.

Finally, the fourth most important archetype in this tale is *the archetype of Quaternity*, which includes the four main characters: the author and the little prince (as two aspects, two personas of the same character), the flower, the fox and the snake. It is the archetype of the Self, the archetype that integrates all the other archetypes. It is the self-discovery that the author experiences in the desert.

However, what does the snake represent in this story?

The snake is the vehicle that carries us into the archetypal world and through archetypal time (that have another dimension and a different flow than the physical space and time). And here I refer to the snake in its two aspects: the boa constrictor, which takes us from reality into the world of childhood, and the desert snake, the one that takes us from the world of childhood back to reality.

In my opinion, the snake represents an archetypal symbol of *the Passage archetype*, an archetype that Jung never mentioned, but that we all feel in his writings as being the catalytic archetype that transcends time and space, allowing us to be here and there, then and now.

To return to one of the questions of this paper: Why does this tale touch us so much? Probably because each time we read it, it creates a

vehicle that takes us back to our childhood. And why does it sadden us? Because, “bitten by the snake” we come back “to our planet”.

INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

The desert as a place of magical encounter between the author and the little prince is the location of choice for meeting the Self. Following the Father’s incentive, and imparted through the Holy Spirit, Jesus withdrew into the desert for 40 days to meditate and to prepare Him for what was lying ahead. “What makes the desert beautiful”, said the little prince, “is that somewhere it hides a well...” (Saint-Exupéry, 52)

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