The Wise and the Foolish
Individuation

Motif J1030.1§

Individuation is "the process whereby a part of a whole becomes progressively more distinct and independent" (English and English 1966, 258). Individuation plays a critical role in the development of the self and is one of the main archetypes in Jungian analytical psychology and a key to the understanding of the great world religions and philosophies (Progooff 1953, 144). Prefacing Individuation in Fairy Tales, Marie-Louise von Franz, one of C.G. Jung’s closest associates and dedicated disciples, states, "individuation is a natural, ubiquitous phenomenon which has found innumerable symbolic descriptions in the folk tales of all countries. One can even say that the majority of folk tales deal with one or another aspect of this most meaningful basic life process in man" (1990, vii).

PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS AND THE MOTIF-INDEX

Relating the mystical yet pervasive concept of the self to the classificatory system of the Motif-Index requires a reconsideration of the Index’s basic schema. As pointed out by the present writer (El-Shamy 1995, 1:15–16), Thompson eschewed treating psychological factors. Although the Motif-Index dedicates a whole section (W) to "Traits of Character" and addresses a few aspects of character under other headings (e.g., H1550, “Tests of character”; P12, “Character of kings”), the word personality does not appear at all in the Motif-Index. However, as pointed out by the present psychological (and sociological) concepts do appear in folk expressions as a matter of empirical observation by the folk, and they can be of significant classificatory (indexing)
MATURE GAINED BY LEAVING HOME

Jung’s concept of the process of individuation and its effect on the individual is a theme that recurs repeatedly in lore, literature, and belief systems. From a general perspective, individuation may be viewed as the gaining of wisdom by a person; thus individuation may be classified as one of the motifs within the J chapter ("The wise and the foolish"). More specifically, individuation belongs to the category of “Acquisition and possession of wisdom (knowledge),” of which “Self-dependence” (J1030) is an aspect. A new motif that addresses individuation in general terms is designated as J1030.1.§, “Maturity (growing up, independence, ‘individualisation’) gained by leaving home.”

Leaving home and gaining wisdom in the world independently of one’s parents and other family members may be seen as part of the struggle between the individual and society. The individual seeks independence while society seeks to keep the individual within its fold (El-Shamy 1997, I:38). This dynamic tension constitutes the process of individuation.

One of the cases von Franz uses to illustrate this process is a tale from Spain titled “The White Parrot,” which she treats without reference to available motif or tale type indexes (von Franz 1990, 219 n. 1; Spanische Märchen 1940, 155). The tale belongs to AT 707, The Three Golden Sons. She summarizes it: “The queen bears marvelous children. They are stolen away. The queen is banished. The [children’s] quest for the speaking bird, the singing tree, and the water of life.”

The Types of the Folktale outlines Type 707 as follows:

I. Wishing for a Husband. (a) Three girls make a boast that if they marry the king they will have triplets with golden hair, a chain around the neck, and a star on the forehead. (b) The king overhears the youngest and marries her.

II. Cullumated Wife. (a) The elder sisters substitute a dog for the new born children and accuse the wife of giving birth to the dog. (b) The children are thrown into a stream but rescued by a miller (or a fisher) (c) The wife is imprisoned.

III. The Children’s Adventures. (a) After the children have grown up, the eldest son sets out to find his father or (b) to seek the speaking bird, the singing tree, and the water of life. (c) He and his brother, who goes for him, both fail and are transformed to marble columns. (d) The sister by courtesy and obedience to an old woman succeeds in rescuing them and bringing back the magic objects.

IV. Restoration of Children. (a) The attention of the king is drawn to the children and the magic objects. (b) The bird of truth reveals to him the whole history. (c) The children and the wife are restored; the sister-in-law is punished. (Aurine and Thompson 1964)

Despite the confining title that specifies the number of children and limits the children’s gender to males, several variations and subtypes of the narrative are encountered. Typically, the tale’s action involves castaway infants: one sister and her only brother (El-Shamy 1980, no. 9), one sister and her brothers who may be two or three in number, or brothers only and no sister (O’Sullivan 1966, no. 19; in sub-Saharan Africa), as the title of the tale type specifies. Often the children are twins.

This tale type is extremely widespread throughout the world, which may indicate the archetypal nature of its basic plot. In all its manifestations, the process of individuation can be seen as the central force around which the plot coheres. The tale is normally concluded with the children—regardless of their gender—surviving the dangers of the outside world and triumphantly returning to their original home to right social injustices. Justice is achieved by applying the benefits of some of their acquisitions during their forced sojourn and quests for treasured objects (i.e., self).

Because of the role that the bird plays in revealing the truth, von Franz views it as the “central motif” around which her Jungian interpretations are developed. The self, or the “hidden treasure,” in tale type AT 707 is symbolically represented by a number of unique items. Of these we may mention the dancing plant (D1646, “Magic dancing object”; D1646.58, “Magic dancing bamboo—reed”), the singing object (D1615, “Magic singing object”), and the truth-speaking bird (B0131, “Bird of truth”; B0131.2, “Bird reveals treachery”); also present are the acts of petrification (D231, “Transformation: man to stone. [Petrification]”) and disenchantment (D700, “Person disenchantment”; R1598, “Sister disenchants bewitched brother”; D700.18, “Petrified person (community) disencharcted”).

For Jung and his disciples, any of these objects or acts constitutes a hidden treasure that is part of the elusive self, which the person is trying to approach or comprehend. Von Franz equates the dangers the children face in acquiring these items with forces or agents guarding a treasure (or self) against looterto-be. She states that wherever there is a treasure there is a snake wound around it, and wherever there is the water of life there is a lion guarding it. Thus, “you cannot get near the self and the meaning of life without being on the razor’s edge of falling into greed, into darkness, and into the shadowy
aspect of the personality” (von Franz 1990, 49). Hence, the acquisition by the castaway children of such treasures as the dancing bamboo, and the singing water may be seen as steps bringing the adventurer closer to the ultimate truth (self), which he or she will never be able to fully comprehend.

The final step in the process of individuation is the acquisition of the speaking “bird-of-truth” (the white parrot in von Franz’s Spanish version). The bird is a symbol for the mysterious truth that the unconscious speaks. That means that it is a “threshold” phenomenon: it conveys the wondrous thoughts of the unconscious in its speech. It is probably the paradox that it is a bird speaking in human language that makes it a very fitting symbol (von Franz 1990, 67). The bird tells the community (the children’s father) the truth about life and his children, explaining that the substitute for the children (cat, dog) could not be his offspring because it is not human.

With the father and the community renouncing the old belief about the “children” and accepting the truth as presented by them (or by an indisputable source of truth acting on their behalf), a significant aspect of the process of individuation is accomplished.

PETRIFICATION AS A SYMBOL OF INABILITY TO DEVELOP

A recurrent trait of the talking bird is its magic ability to transform the person who seeks to possess it into stone (Motif D231, “Transformation: man to stone. ([Petrification])”). This transformation occurs upon the seecker’s breaking of a taboo imposed by the bird; in AT 707, the taboo is usually speaking or replying to the bird (Motif C4068, “Tabu: answering (responding to) call or question”). Frequently, the brother—like many others before him—becomes a marble column, a stone, a granule of sand, or the like. It is the sister who saves her male sibling from this oblivion. Petrification may be seen as a symbol of the inability to develop and, consequently, the inability to be in touch with the self (von Franz 1990, 68). To be disenchanted and rendered into human form once more is to continue to grow and attempt to approach and comprehend the mysterious self.

Another case in which individuation seems to be the cardinal theme is Motif H1376.2, “Quest: learning what fear is.” The motif constitutes the driving force for tale type AT 326, The Youth Who Wanted to Learn What Fear Is. A Turkish rendition presented through the editorship of a Hungarian folklorist (Kunos 1913, 12–18) may be summarized as follows:

I. A woman asked her son to close the door because she had fear. She could not explain what fear was. So he set out to find out what fear can be.

II. He met forty fearsome robbers in the mountains but he was not afraid. One of them sent him to the cemetery to make pastry. A hand reached out from the grave and asked for its share; he struck it with a spoon, thus causing it to disappear. Another robber sent him to a lonely building. He entered and saw on a raised platform a swing in which “a child was weeping.” A “maid” approached him and asked that he let her climb upon his shoulders to reach the child. “He consented and the girl mounted,” but she pressed his neck with her feet until “he was in danger of strangulation.” However, she jumped down and disappeared after dropping a bracelet. The youth took it and left. A Jew claimed that the bracelet was his. The two went to the judge, but neither could prove his claim. So the judge decided to impound it until either could produce its match as proof of ownership. At the coast, the boy saw a ship toasting and a rope and heard fearful cries. “He quickly divested himself of his clothes, sprang into the water, dived to the bottom of the sea,” and found the Daughter-of-the-Sea shaking the vessel. “He fell upon her, flogged her soundly, and drove her away.” As he walked he saw a garden in front of which there was a fountain. Three pigeons dived into the water; each was transformed into a maiden. They laid a table and drank a toast “to the health” of the youth who had shown no fear. These three maidens were the ones involved. The youth presented himself. “All three maidens hastened to embrace him.” He told them about the case of the bracelet. “They took him to a cave where a number of stately halls that opened before him overwhelmed him with astonishment.” They gave him the bracelet’s match; he took it to the judge, won his case, and hastened back to “the cave.” The maidens told him, “You part from us no more;” but he “tore himself away” and left. He came to a spot where there was a crowd. He was informed that “the shah of the country was no more.” A pigeon was to be set loose and he on whose head the bird should alight would be “declared heir to the throne.” Three different pigeons chose the youth, but each time he refused the honor. “The widow of the late ruler” promised to “show him fear” if he would accept the “dignity for tonight at least.” He consented. Soon he learned that “whenever shah was one day dead the next.” During the night he burned a “coffin” which was being prepared for him; then he slept soundly. In the morning the slaves carried the news that he had survived to the “sultana.”

III. The sultana, thereupon, ordered the cook to place “a live sparrow in the soup-dish for supper.” Evening came. “The young shah and the sultana sat down for supper.” At the sultana’s persuasive insistence, the reluctant “youth” lifted the lid off the soup-dish. “A bird flew out”; that incident gave him a momentous shock of fear. “Seest Thou!” cried the sultana. “That is fear.”

IV. “Then the marriage feast was ordered [ . . . ]. The young shah had his mother brought to his palace and they lived happily ever after” (El-Shamy 1967; El-Shamy 1986).

In the text outlined above, a youth with no independent social identity seeks to wrest his place in society (represented by parental authority). He leaves home and experiences the struggle between life and death, represented by robbers, cemeteries, graves, drowning, and a coffin being prepared for him; he
also experiences the struggle between good and evil, represented by helping a "maiden" with her child, disputing with a usurper, refusing erotic association with supernatural beauties, and saving ship passengers; and his final struggle as an individual is with societal authority represented by royalty. The youth triumphs over all of these struggles, which embody pairs of Jungian archetypes. In the case of the adversary from a different ethnic or religious group, the victory is through civility and legal means rather than violence. Finally, having been selected by a bird as the true successor to kingship, the boy succeeds in learning what he had set out from home to learn: what fear is. In learning this emotion, which is required for survival, the youth has approached his self. Also, he has gone through the process of individuation and can exercise his own authority over the community by becoming its ruler.

**CHOICE OF ROADS AND INDIVIDUATION**

Heroes and heroines on quests are usually faced with the need to make a momentous choice, such as choosing a certain road or direction from among others. Such a choice is represented by Motifs N122.0.1, "The choice of roads: at parting of three roads are equivocal inscriptions telling what will happen if each is chosen," and N122.0.29, "The choice of roads: Road of Safety, Road of Sorrow, or Road of No-return."

A case that seems to be confined to the individuation of a young female in a male-dominated society occurs in a folktale that is widespread in the Middle East and that may be summarized as follows:

> There are two brothers: a rich one who has seven sons, and a poor one who has seven daughters. The father of the daughters addresses the father of the sons as "Father-of-Joys," but the father of the sons addresses the father of the daughters as: "Father-of-Sorrows" (or the like). The youngest daughter persuades her father to propose a trade-mission as a competition between the eldest son and the youngest daughter. The father of the sons ridicules the proposition, but agrees. The rich brother provides his son with capital and servants; the poor brother has no assets with which he would aid his daughter. She, however, manages to raise a little capital with the help of women neighbors. The trip begins with both competitors (paternal cousins) together on the road. They come to a parting of the road where three choices are given: "Road of Safety," "Road of Sorrow," "Road of No-return." The boy jumps ahead of the girl and takes the "Road of Safety"; she takes "The Road of He-Who-Doesn't-Return."

Disguised as a man, she comes to a country where salt is exchanged for gold. She trades her salt for gold and becomes a prominent merchant (AT 1651A, *Fortune in Salt*; Motif N411.4, "Salt in saltless land sold for fortune"). The prince of the country falls in love with the new merchant (Motif T463.0.1§, "Pseudo-homosexual (male) attraction: man falls in love with another man who turns out to be a woman in disguise"). She successfully eschews detection of her true gender and departs to her home with her legitimately earned wealth. By treachery, her male cousin claims that the wealth is his own and reports to the girl's father that his daughter has gone astray.

Truth is revealed before the town's judge and all its inhabitants. The prince (who had followed his guest after learning her actual identity) testifies to her honorable conduct. The cheating cousin and his father are put to shame. The heroine and her father are honored. She marries the prince. (El-Shamy 1999, no. 9, 1–9; cf. no. 30)

The tale is designated as new tale type 923C§, *Girl Wins Against Boy (usually, her Eldest Paternal-cousin) in a Contest of Worth* (El-Shamy 1995, I:429). Our text reflects a number of gender-oriented themes. Among these is the disadvantageous position (e.g., low communal esteem, raising capital, choice of roads) in which a girl—as a matter of course—is placed. Yet in spite of these shackles, the heroine emerges as the winner and succeeds in getting the community to view her in more positive terms. By taking a risk, choosing a hazardous road, and maintaining her gender-role, she comes closer to understanding her capabilities. The wealth that she brings home is comparable to the guarded treasure, or the self. Her triumphal homecoming symbolizes a completed process of individuation as a capable female.

**INDIVIDUATION IN POPULAR CULTURE AND ELITE LITERATURE**

Examples of the recurrence of the process of individuation in popular culture can be marshaled in droves. For example, in the motion picture *Home Alone* (1990), a small boy is left alone (abandoned, albeit inadvertently) by his entire family, who are traveling abroad. He is victimized by a pair of burglars. In his turn, he exacts a series of painful acts of revenge on them, climaxing in their arrest by the police. Upon their return from their trip, family members who had earlier slighted the boy accord him his due recognition and acclaim.

If we allow for different lifestyles and technological innovations, we will find that the plot sketched above occurs in an international tale type: AT 1538, *The Youth Cheated in Selling Oxen Avenge Himself*. Both the boy in the motion picture and the youth in the folktale avenge themselves on robbers through a series of acts of revenge including whipping, trapping, and tarring and feathering (or gelling and feathering). Motifs commonly found in both narratives include K24008, *Deception for deception (bit for bit); deceived person gets even in a like manner (same rose, strategy, trick, etc.)*; N2628, *Train of troubles from boy's (youth's) vengeance*. In different disguises he punishes his cheats (robbers) by repeated beatings=" Robber reformed by repeated beatings."
In elite literature, examples of individuation may be found in innumerable works, including Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (1837–1839) and *David Copperfield* (1849–1850), and Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876). In the latter, Twain describes the experiences of two runaway boys: Tom and Huckleberry Finn. The novel is brought to a close (Chapter XXIX) with the triumphant return of the runaways with plenty of cash (cf. treasure). In the Conclusion, Twain states that the boy who ran away from home and about whom he wrote is not the same one that returned. He writes: “So ends this chronicle. It being strictly a history of a boy, it must stop here; the story could not go much further without becoming the history of a man.” The story ends where folktales with corresponding subject matter normally end: the presumed completion of the process of individuation.

Hasan El-Shamy

See also: Choice of Roads and Crossroads; Sister and Brother.

REFERENCES


Deceptions