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Salvation through Love: Reflections on Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman*

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Introduction

In this essay I would like to consider some themes of psychological importance in Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman*. As a psychologist and psychoanalyst, my focus will be primarily on the psychological structure of the drama rather than the music.

There are three principal ways to put an opera 'on the couch'. First, we can examine the opera as a psychological expression of the composer's inner life use it to analyze the composer. Although I will not be attempting this, it is a venerable tradition begun by Freud in his analysis of numerous works of art and literature (1). A second approach is to treat the opera as if the characters were real people with individual inner lives that we analyze as if they were on the couch. A third approach is also possible in great opera since the characters tend to transcend the personal and move to the universal and symbolic. This approach assumes that the opera consists of "crystallized condensations of complex, over-determined, and enduring emotional themes" (2) and that we identify with the characters and respond deeply because the opera presents a psychodrama of our own inner lives. This is especially possible with an opera such *The Flying Dutchman*, which although set in the early modern period, is rooted in tales that have sojourned through many minds over time and has the quality of timeless myth. We know that Wagner borrowed heavily from a play by Heinrich Heine (3), who in turn borrowed the Dutchman tale from nautical folklore, and, in certain aspects, the *Dutchman* resembles the tales of Prometheus, Atlas, Odysseus, and the Ancient Mariner. Blending these latter two approaches, I would like to examine the psychological underpinnings of its mythic dimension.

The Dutchman once swore an oath that he would never give up trying to conquer nature by sailing around a certain Cape. The Devil took him at his word and cursed him to sail the stormy seas until Judgment Day. An Angel of God intervened and told him that finding a woman who will be faithful until death could redeem him. So, in a compromise between the Angel and Devil, once every seven years he is allowed to dock and search for this woman.

However murky the theology of this back-story, it is the one provided by Senta in her beautiful Ballade in Act II. Senta is entranced by the tragic plight of the Dutchman and fantasizes about being the one woman whose love saves him, leaving little room for her unfortunate suitor, Erik. Senta's father, on the other hand, is entranced by the treasure Dutchman has accumulated and selfishly offers his daughter in exchange. Fortunately, when Senta and the Dutchman are brought together, it turns out they do have real 'chemistry', and all goes well until the Dutchman mistakenly accuses Senta of being untrue to him with Erik. The Dutchman abandons his hope of salvation and puts out to sea once again. Senta, proclaiming her true and selfless love, throws herself off the cliff into the sea after him. The curse is lifted and the phantom ship sinks. Wagner's final stage directions are as follows: "In the glow of the rising sun, the transfigured forms of the Dutchman and Senta, clasped in each other's arm, are seen rising over the wreck, and soaring into the sky." (3)

Searching for One's 'Other Half'

The theme of transformation through romantic love is an old one that finds an explanation in Plato's *Symposium*. Here Aristophanes explains that humans were once integrated creatures that were both male and female, with one head, four hands, four feet, and both male and female genitals. Being unified and whole, they had tremendous power and thus presented a threat to the Gods. But the Gods knew if they killed these creatures there would be no one then to worship them. So, Zeus came up with a solution that would allow the creatures to continue to exist but with greatly diminished strength. Each creature was split in two, and the two halves were sent in off in opposite directions to spend the rest of their lives preoccupied with searching for their other half.

Couples therapists (4) can easily lend support to the psychological kernels of truth embodied in this myth, and since individual analytic work tends to center on Eros in all its difficult, unrequited, and/or fulfilled glories, a psychoanalyst encounters many ‘Dutchmen’ and ‘Sentas’, each searching for their ‘other halves’. At the risk of sounding reductionist, stereotypic, or, worse in my view, pre-feminist, I would like to consider the deep psychology of this as embodied by the Dutchman and Senta.

The Dutchman

‘She taught me to love’; ‘she helps me get in touch my feelings’; ‘she keeps me grounded’; ‘she saved my life; I’d be at sea without her’. In my analytic practice, I often hear expressions like this from men who feel they have found their other half. Psychoanalysts have observed that while both boys and girls have the developmental task of arriving at a sense of individual identity, boys in our culture have a special challenge than is different from girls in important ways (5). While both begin in a primary relationship with a woman, the mother, the boy is called upon to individuate and develop a so-called ‘masculine’ identity. Typically, this involves dis-identifying with the mother’s emotional, nurturing, and caring aspects, and, in the process, trying to become less vulnerable, less dependent, and tougher. One consequence is that the boy may begin to lose touch with his emotional life and grow into a man who fears closeness with a woman in a relationship in intimacy involves empathy through emotional identification.

No wonder men so often feel compelled to prove they are ‘real men’, while women are largely immune from a comparable affliction. In earlier times when brute strength, endurance, and physical challenge were much more a part of life than today, culture constructed and reinforced ‘masculinity’ as the opposite of ‘femininity’. So mythically speaking, when the Dutchman swears that nothing can stop him from conquering the Cape, he embodies this masculine world of omnipotence, competition, and achievement at any cost. The result is a sort of deal with the Devil, and, as we know, when you deal with the Devil, there is always a price to pay. By disavowing his more maternal/feminine aspects, the man acquires worldly power, but, in the process, loses touch with the rest of himself (his other half), which has been deadened. I think this psychological constellation is well-represented by the curse and the ghoulish ship full of the dead sailors that cannot

be roused by the joyous sailors on shore who try in vain to enliven them into celebrating marital inter-dependence.

But analysts have also observed that when we disavow parts of ourselves, some aspect of us still seeks to reintegrate. From this point of view, the Angel of God that Senta sings of could symbolize the life force trying to re-establish unity and wholeness. The curse, with its compromise, nicely depicts the Dutchman's psychological entrapment, with the Devil and psychic death on one shoulder, and the Angel and the life force of Eros on the other.

Senta

What about Senta's preoccupation with the Dutchman? While men are cursed to leave port and set sail away from the motherland, women are cursed to remain on shore in the motherland trading sailing for spinning. Psychologically this may require disavowing aspects of their own strength, intelligence, independence, and personal power. This may be subtle or overt, depending on culture, class, and education, but even in the post-feminist era in an unusually progressive part of the world, I am often surprised what an enduring split this can be at the deepest levels of emotional life in the most modern, assertive, and accomplished women in my practice. From this perspective, Senta is trying to move beyond the constrictions of culturally proscribed femininity. Had she settled for Eric, she would have settled into the domesticity of being a housewife to a hunter, but Senta wants much more. In searching for her other half in the form of the Dutchman, perhaps she is shooting for a higher goal, of recovering the masculine side of herself. In most productions, we do not meet Senta or the see a portrait of the Dutchman hanging on the wall until the Act II. A recent performance by the San Francisco Opera (6) handled this in a psychologically astute manner. Even before we meet Captain Daland, normally the first character to take the stage, the production presented Senta working on the portrait of the Dutchman, and she continues to work on it when she makes her appearance again. Somewhat reminiscent of art therapy, this way of depicting her emphasizes a Senta that is very active in the psychological work of rediscovering and creatively developing her other half, the repressed masculine aspects of self.

The Missing Mother

Moving from the mythic to the individual and personal, there are a probably other questions in our minds. What other reasons might we imagine for why Senta is so wrapped up with saving the Dutchman that she would jump off the cliff into the sea? Why is Captain Daland so quick to sell his daughter to the Dutchman? And where is Senta's mother?

We don't know and we can't know, but we can creatively imagine. Perhaps Senta, having lost her mother, has also lost her father who has turned to worldly wealth as a salvo for his grief rather than mourning his loss and staying emotionally close to Senta. This raises the possibility the Senta's desire to redeem the Dutchman carries a displaced longing to help a father who is lost at sea with grief. Perhaps when she jumps off the cliff, she is getting two birds with one stone: saving her father while reuniting with her mother in death. Or perhaps the Dutchman represents what became of Captain Daland following the loss of his wife. They do seem to be subliminally linked by the fact that when they meet, the Captain is seven miles from home and the Dutchman is seven years from shore.

Finally, Captain Daland may be viewed as the precursor to the greedy Dwarves and Giants of Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung*, representing the search for wealth and power over love. From this point of view, we could think about Captain Daland, the Dutchman, and Senta as being at different developmental stages in their capacity to love. Daland would represent the base instinct of greed and self-interest over love. The Dutchman, at next stage of evolution, realizes that love is more valuable than wealth and achievement, but at the same time, is still confused and troubled. Because he feels that love can be bought and sold, he projects this sensibility into his prospective 'other half' making it nearly impossible to conceive of the true love he seeks. From this perspective, Senta would represent the highest form of selfless love.

The theme of love and salvation is ubiquitous in Wagner's work, and I will end by quoting from a letter (7) written to his friend, Carl August Roedel, a compose-conductor who was politically active with Wagner in the revolutions in 1848. In the spirit of the

themes emphasized in this brief essay, the letter may emphasize the need to reunite the 'masculine and feminine' parts of ourselves.

Love in its most perfect reality is only possible between the sexes: it is only as man and woman that human beings can truly love. Every other manifestation of love can be traced back to that one absorbingly real feeling, of which all other affections are but an emanation, a connection, or an imitation. It is an error to look on this as only one of the forms in which love is revealed, as if there were other forms coequal with it, or even superior to it. He who after the manner of metaphysicians prefers *unreality* to *reality*, and derives the concrete from the abstract--in short, puts the word before the fact--may be right in esteeming the idea of love as higher than the expression of love, and may affirm that actual love made manifest in feeling is nothing but the outward and visible sign of a pre-existent, non-sensuous, abstract love; and he will do well to despise that sensuous function in general. In any case it is safe to bet that such a man had never loved or been loved as human beings can love, or he would have understood that in despising this feeling, what he condemned was its sensual expression, the outcome of man's animal nature, and not true human love. The highest satisfaction and expression of the individual is only to be found in his complete absorption, and that is only possible through love. Now a human being is both *man* and *woman*: it is only when these two are united that the real human being exists; and thus, it is only by love that man and woman attain to the full measure of humanity. But when nowadays we talk of a human being, such heartless blockheads are we that quite involuntarily we only think of man. It is only in the union of man and woman by love (sensuous and super sensuous) that the human being exists; and as the human being cannot rise to the conception of anything higher than his own existence--his own being--so the transcendent act of his life is this consummation^[L]_[SEP] of his humanity through love.

Notes

1. The following papers may be found in *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* in (J. Strachey Ed. and Trans.), London: Hogarth Press.
 - (1908). Creative Writers and Day Dreaming. S.E. 9. 141-156.
 - (1910). Leonardo da Vinci. S.E. 11, 59-138.
 - (1913). The Theme of the Three Caskets. S.E. 12, 289-302.
 - (1914). The Moses of Michelangelo. S.E. 13, 210-241.
 - (1928). Dostoevsky and parricide. S.E. 28. 175-198.
2. Rather, L. (2012). Love and its subversions in Verdi's *Otello* and *Aida*. *fort da*, Vol XVIII Vol 1: 25-36.
3. Newman, E. (1949) *The Wagner operas*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
4. An excellent introduction to this perspective is found in Hendrix, H. (1988). *Getting the love you want: A guide for couples*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
5. Chodorow, N. J. (1978). *The Reproduction of Mothering*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
6. San Francisco Opera. *The Flying Dutchman*, Performance November 3, 2013. Patrick Summers (Conductor), Patrika Ionesco (Director & Set Designer), Ian Robertson (Chorus Director). Greer Ginsley (Dutchman), Lisa Lindstrom (Senta), Kristinn Sigmundsen (Daland) Ian Storey (Erik).
7. Wagner, R. (1854) Wagner, R. Letter IV (January 25, 1854). From *Richard Wagner's Letters to August Roeckel* (Trans. Eleanor Sellar) (1854) Wagner, R. Letter IV (January 25, 1854). In *Richard Wagner's Letters to August Roeckel*, pp. 74-116. London: J.W Arrowsmith (1897).
*Available online: http://www.hschamberlain.net/roeckel/wagner_roeckel.html#p74