

Running Head: STRANGER THAN FICTION

‘Stranger Than Fiction’ – A Depth Psychological Analysis

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Sitting in front of my computer I am looked at by a blank screen. Words are written then erased. I try to write but I am blocked by tension building up in my stomach. Typing, deleting and trying again in vein. The screen fills up with ideas, but masked voices show up and the screen gets cleared yet again. It is as if my blood vessels, organs, and bones were constricting by means of torture, and along with them my whole being slowly shrinks and diminishes. As unembodied beings showing up as voices of shame and judgment rapidly appear, 'I' seem to leave the scene and disappear becoming almost nothingness itself. The voices gradually become intelligible: "What's the point?" they say, "you know that your writing is not good enough, right? And no matter what you do, it will never be. So stop making so much effort." I find myself chained to the position in which I have no choice but to hear them. "If you were smart," they insist, "no doubt you would be able to articulate yourself as well as the *others*. When *they* read your paper, *they* will find out your real worth. *They* will discover your lack of originality and lack of skill. You will be found naked in your ordinary skin, a replaceable skin; replaceable like your paper. One more paper in an ocean of papers." And so, gentle reader, in sharing with you these few intimate deafening whispers I welcome you to my world; a world deeply inhabited by complexes. With these few words I offer you a glimpse into a story behind the paper you are about to read; a story that plays itself out in a secret chamber underneath the main stage reserved only for the paramount shows. Indeed it is a determinate story unwilling to leave from which I don't seem able to escape and to which I find myself often surrendering my power and my will. It is a story that marks me with a bleeding knife as I move in the world; a story that in its desire to be seen, to emerge onto the landscape of the main stage, it is seemingly moving me to

write this paper about its self, a complex; about its essence and its own hidden hopes and needs.

According to Jung, “complexes... provide the royal road to the unconscious” (Jacobi, 1974, p. 6). Robert Johnson emphasized two additional important pathways to approach the unconscious, “one is by dreams; the other is through the imagination” (1986, p. 4). In an effort to further understand the dynamics of complexes within the unconscious, I will make an attempt to analyze the film, “Stranger Than Fiction” (Forster, 2007) itself a product of the imagination, using depth psychological perspectives. The film discusses indirectly relevant themes for modern times such free will and fate, collective and personal ethics and the need for a sense of sacrifice. Our values, attitudes, beliefs, and interpretations of the world are important building blocks of the lives we create; the stories we live by. Astrologers would argue that the constellations of stars on the day of our birth, each corresponding to a different house with its images and meanings, end up influencing our lives. A Depth Psychologist might speak in similar terms, but referring to the realm of the unconscious. Namely, that unseen forces in our personal and collective unconscious, have a powerful effect on our lives. These unconscious forces internally constellate in various forms and contain unique feeling-tones. Each such constellation, a unique structure associated with a different archetype, is a complex. According to Jung, “the contents of the personal unconscious are chiefly the feeling-toned complexes” (Jung, 1983, p. 397) and as we become conscious of these forces, assimilate and integrate them, we engage in a process

of liberation of the fragments of our psyche that then can be united to create a whole person.

Harold Crick, a lonely IRS agent, who lives in a mechanistic world of calculation, precision, rules and regulations, becomes aware of such a complex in “Stranger Than Fiction”. In the story, Harold’s mundane life is transformed when he becomes conscious of a voice in his head, narrating his life. First curious, then frustrated and angry and finally terrified, Harold seeks to get to the bottom of this phenomena and to find the narrator before the story kills him. Since the psychiatrist is not able to help him, he turns to Professor Jules Hilbert, an expert in English literature. Together they find out that Harold is the main character in a novel-in-progress and the voice belongs to the author, Karen Eiffel, known for killing her heroes.

I understand the essence of the story to be about a man’s journey to find and own his myth, as an expression of his whole personality. We witness the transformation of a man who relates passively to his fate into a man who consciously participates in the world, taking responsibility for his creativity and relationships. Harold says, “I am somehow involved in some sort of story. Like I’m a character in my own life There are other parts of the story not being told to me and I need to find out what those other parts are before its too late”. For no apparent reason, Harold wakes up one day and realizes to his amazement that a strange ‘voice’ has been narrating his life. ‘You don’t control your fate’ Professor Hilbert tells him in the process of doing a thorough literary ‘analysis’ of Harold. Though this voice knows Harold intimately, it is not his own and it seems to come from another place. Harold has been completely oblivious, until now, to

the fact that his life has been dominated and literally dictated by this other foreign voice. The narrator knows exactly what Harold thinks, believes and does – even before he himself knows – a fact that confuses him quite a bit. The oppressive and dominating ‘other’ is represented in the film both by the internal voice that Harold hears as well as by the external reality of collective norms, values and attitudes creating a dumming thoughtless mass culture, in which Harold lives. The latter point is well expressed in the fact that Harold works for the IRS – an agency that rules and is ruled by countless regulations and laws – in a grey and dull looking warehouse where people are filed as numbers. The film seems to be asking us: Whose rules and regulations are these? Who creates them? What voices are creating this collective story? Harold is completely susceptible to unconscious forces, inner and outer, disguised as natural norms and expectations. According to Jung, as long as Harold doesn’t *experience* his inner life, he will be doomed to this fate as many tend to be in our era. One’s unique personality can easily get lost in the mainstream of a thoughtless mechanical mass. Jung described this dynamic when he said, “the individual.... needs the evidence of the inner, transcendent experience which alone can protect him from the otherwise inevitable submersion in the mass” (Jung, 1983, p. 360).

The film begins with Harold existing in the shadow of his life. Harold’s life, created by the ‘other’, lacks a sense of relationality, passion, and beauty. He lives in an almost empty white room, all alone, depressed and unconscious. He leads a mechanistic life of rules and precise calculations. In fact, he often seems to be a walking computer. He has a compulsion to count and to see everything through its numerical value. In fact,

these mental representations seem to be the only value in his life. But his otherwise rigid routine is broken when he hears for the first time a foreign voice in or through him. Unable to find its source and lacking any control over it, he starts to question his own sanity. A crack seems to have been opened and Harold starts to question his world. He is transformed by this experience, what seems to be for the first time a genuine experience, that leads him to become curious about life and the reality of the other; the other as the voice in him. Harold starts looking for this voice that comes from him but is not him; he is seeking self-knowledge. He starts a movement that will lead him to a conscious engagement with the unconscious where he will face his complex. The complex living his life has been keeping him away from the freedom to self realize and has been repressing the voice of other stories that could be imagined, that could be told. Harold slowly realizes that he prefers to “begin to live in partnership with the unconscious rather than at its mercy or in constant warfare with it” (Johnson, 1986, p. 5).

What are the qualities of Harold’s complex? First of all, the complex personified as the writer, Ms. Eiffel, is independent of the ego-consciousness represented by the main character, Harold. Jung argued that, “complexes can *have* us” (Jung, 1983, p. 38) and they can become a “law unto themselves” (Jacobi, 1974, p. 10). Indeed Ms. Eiffel became a “miniature self-contained psyche’ (p. 12) in Harold’s psychological reality and from that vintage point, has been in control of his life. The first scene of the film is very revealing of this dynamic: A camera set out in outer space follows the voice of the narrator as it zooms in on Harold’s narrow existence, all the way to his watch. The complex is in complete control of Harold’s life and universe.

The story begins with the complex and Harold's ego making an unconscious unity. Harold's sudden recognition of the voice brings in a dialogical dimension to his life. At first the two voices (ego and complex) are in conflict but the state of conscious differentiation created the potential for a conscious integration as well. In the first stage of the differentiation, Harold's habitual sense of self is being messed with and he experiences a sense of confusion. His usual ways of adaptation to the external world are being challenged. This can be seen when Harold is confused by the voice and gives the wrong number to his colleagues or when he is lured into the world of fantasy and sensations, unfamiliar to him, and ends up staring at the breasts of Ms. Pascal the baker. But after the initial shock of his ego-consciousness, Harold maintains a clear separation between his own voice and the identity of the other voice. This leads him to make an assertive determination that he is not suffering from Schizophrenia, as the psychiatrist concludes in their brief meeting. The psychiatrist seems to live in a somewhat mechanical world as well, where the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders clouds her ability to see the person, the particularity of the case before her. It appears that she works with equations such as: hearing voices = schizophrenia = the need of medications.

Befitting a complex, Ms. Eiffel "possesses the uncontrollable, compulsive character of all autonomous forces to which the ego is exposed for better or worse" (Jacobi, 1974, p.11). She seems to have a compulsive attitude about smoking, drinking and about death. Like Harold, Ms. Eiffel lives in the shadow too. She is isolated in her office, doesn't relate to others and holds an amoral attitude. Confined to the

unconscious underworld, she automatically operates in favor of dark values such as illness, tragedy and death. She says, 'I am not in the business of saving lives, in fact, just the opposite'. We first meet Ms. Eiffel in an image from her imagination, the language of the unconscious. On the edge of the roof she imagines herself to fall down to her death. She mentions that in a 'very depressing [repressed?] book' she read of a woman that jumped to her death and 'when she died she could feel the wind against her face'. I heard in her voice a tone of yearning for that experience. Was it death or life that she was looking for? Perhaps both. It is as if she knew that only her death, the death of the complex in the realm of the shadow would bring her life; would allow her to see, feel and experience. As a complex, she is a splinter of psyche. Only by being found by consciousness (thus something within her will die, change) she can be transformed and in a sense, be liberated. Jung claimed that a complex shatters the ego's "unity, splits from it, and acts as an 'animated foreign body in the sphere of consciousness'" (Jacobi, 1974, p. 22). At the same time, the psyche has an organic function that strives for wholeness, which activates the fragments. They want to be brought to light, the only way that wholeness can be restored. In part, I suppose, Ms. Eiffel wanted to be found out by her main characters. Killing her main characters in tragedies might have been her way to communicate, in symptomatic language, that she wants to be seen. The killing might also be an expression of her own desire to die, wanting the compulsive life that she is leading in the shadow to be discovered and destroyed, so she can join life, come to the light and feel the wind on her face, an experience that requires consciousness.

This complex, being so repressed and oppressed from Harold's consciousness is suffering from certain inflation. In our first encounter with Ms. Eiffel, on the edge of a roof, she seems to be playing the role of God as a puppeteer with strings, moving the actions of humans below. This seems to fit Jacobi's observation that "in proportion to their [complexes] distance from consciousness, the complexes take on in the unconscious an archaic-mythological character and an increasing numinosity" (1974, p. 11). As the plot advances and Harold increasingly becomes conscious of his complex ruling his life, we see a transformation take place in the realm of the complex. Ms. Eiffel starts to adapt to a different environment. Jung explains that as complexes become more conscious "they slough off their mythological envelope, and, by entering into the adaptive process going forward in consciousness, they personalize and rationalize themselves to the point where a dialectical discussion becomes possible" (p. 11). Indeed, Ms Eiffel moves from being isolated in her office, to encountering Penny (her secretary), then to a visit in a hospital leading to the end where she meets Harold and later on the professor; the beginning of a genuine relationship. It is interesting to note that it appears that both Harold and Ms. Eiffel, are journeying towards each other, or perhaps both are moving towards consciousness and wholeness. The two start their journeys in the shadow, numb and keeping the world at bay, blocking joy and inspiration.

What is Harold suffering from? What is at the core of his complex? In the hospital scene, a nurse asks Ms. Eiffel 'are you suffering from anything?' to which she responds, 'just from writers block'. What is she blocking or what is being blocked from her? Jung contended that at the center of every complex structure, an archetype will be

found (Jung, 1983). I would argue that the archetypal core of Harold's complex is the Eros archetype. Eros is associated with Love, creation and relatedness. These are aspects that both Ms. Eiffel and Harold lack at first but strive to achieve in the course of their journeys. Harold's soul is seeking to express itself through art and through relationships but all that repressed creative energy has been pushed into the shadow. He has been living in a one-sided world of Logos. Psyche without Eros, without passion, desire, and love, without a sense of relationship with others leads him to live a senseless and aimless life, which according to Jung is "the general neurosis of our age" (1983, p. 211). Fate, the mechanism of his complex, narrated and lived his Logical and un-Erotic life. Can he get out of the grip of this fate? Robert Johnson says, "in the deepest sense, this symbolic interaction with the archetypes, puts us in the remarkable position of playing a role in the working out of fate" (1986, p. 158). In his symbolic quest, Harold is guided by a psychopomp (Professor Hilbert) to his complex while a new character enters his life, Ms. Pascal the baker. Is she perhaps the personification of the Eros archetype? She is a beautiful, sensual, caring and creative woman who helps to reintroduce Harold to Eros – love, joy, intimacy and sweetness. With her presence, her body, and her whole personality that he seems to eat with his eyes, she opens him up to experience himself and the world in a new way. Her offering of cookies and milk to him, which he eats with clear delight, is a turning point in Harold's journey. By accepting her offering he further internalizes, literally ingesting her medicine, the Eros consciousness. He starts to create resistance to his complex, which appears here as expected, in this moment of crucial transformation, in the form of personal attitudes ('I don't like cookies') and collective

rules ('IRS agents should not receive presents'). As a neurotic he "fears the real encounter with life inner or outer, so he thinks life rather than experience it" (Jacobi, 1974, p. 18) but now he begins to experience life through his senses.

How can the complex be resolved? The first step in transforming a complex is making it conscious. As long as Harold was not aware of the voice dictating his life, he was one with it and completely unconscious of it. When the complex became the 'other voice', a path for wholeness was created in the sense that 'differentiation is individuation' (Slater, February 2007). Harold was able to recognize it, find it and confront it. A mere intellectual understanding of the complex is not enough but it has to be also assimilated and integrated as Jacobi explained, "knowledge of its existence seems futile; its harmful action will continue until we succeed in 'discharging' it, or . . . until we succeed in assimilating it emotionally" (1974, p. 10), in other words, "only the emotional experience coupled with the understanding and integration of its content can resolve it" (p. 16)

After hearing Ms. Eiffel voice in a synchronistic moment on the television, Harold sets out to meet her. He finds her contact information through an old audit the IRS did on her. Perhaps this represents that Harold unconsciously knew about her and how to get to her all along. Her information was under his nose from the beginning. In the meeting between them, he asks her not to kill him as she planned in the already written outline. The story though was not typed yet, which means that Harold's story was still in a state of potential. He took the manuscript from her and presented it to Professor Hilbert first to find out what he should do. But at this point, hearing from another what

he should do or not do was not enough for him. Harold was seeking knowledge through direct experience and self knowledge. He read the story on the bus for hours assimilating this self-knowledge. Then he made his decision. One could think that there was no room for will and decision making, after all Ms. Eiffel, his fate, decided earlier that she was going to kill him. But Harold, nonetheless, made a decision. He took on an attitude of sacrifice. When one directly faces a complex, engages eye to eye and face to face with shadow and when self knowledge is assimilated, one is left forever changed. Something within the ego-consciousness has to be sacrificed with full awareness. He realizes that Ms. Eiffel's book is a master piece, his life and death is a master piece exactly as it is. He surrenders and allows her to kill him. Fully conscious of it, Harold chose to sacrifice his life for values that he believed in. Now Eros present in his life, a sense of relatedness has been created. Having encountered a part of his shadow, death was no longer something to fully reject. For the sake of brilliant art or perhaps to save the life of a child that falls in front of a bus by Harold, he is willing to fully give up control. This surrender of the ego to something greater than itself is vital in the process of healing complexes. When confronting a complex, personal will sees and realizes its limits. A complex "can [only] be suppressed with the effort of the will but not argued out of existence" (Jung, 1983, p. 38). This surrender is an essential aspect in Alcoholics Anonymous for example, in which Jung and his theories were very instrumental. A sense of sacrifice for something greater than ourselves has to take place before we can heal.

The complex goes through its own process of sacrifice. Ms. Eiffel gains a sense of ethical responsibility. Beyond that, she starts to feel pain and remorse for killing all of her eight previous main characters. By encountering the ego-consciousness and his attitude of sacrifice, Ms. Eiffel's rigid voice is transformed. She seems to make a first step toward overcoming her smoking addiction and she too, sacrifices. She decides not to kill Harold because 'a man that fully aware goes into his death, is the kind of man you want to keep'. Her voice is transformed into a gentle one. She starts to recognize the meaning and importance not of mental images and logical calculations but of subtle experiences in life, she starts to embody life and appreciate the essential role that details play in our stories such as a warm embrace, a kind encouragement and a wrist watch. These she sees now, are much more than accessories to life but through them meaning, beauty and soul are revealed.

Finally, the film makes two important statements about freedom and ethics. In this culture we value freedom greatly but what is the meaning of freedom? What are the qualities of freedom that we long for? Is freedom connected with ethical responsibilities? Genuine freedom, I believe, lies in the ability *to have* and *to make* choices. As long as complexes unconsciously rule our life and we are unaware of their existence, we end up acting and reacting to them, while being unable to manifest ourselves in the world as an expression of our whole personality. Jung explains that, "the development of personality.... also means fidelity to the law of ones own being. . . . Personality can never develop unless the individual chooses his own way, consciously and with moral deliberation" (1983, p. 197). Attaining freedom, as the film shows,

requires a personal journey into ones shadow, a commitment to face ones complexes and a willingness to sacrifice. Freedom is encountered from within. Freedom, seen in this way, leads us to ask: What voice, what part of me, what story, is moving me to act in this moment? Is it the voice of fear? The voice of control? The voice of love? What is my whole personality choosing? In revealing our myths, we get to know, to befriend our different voices and we gain self-knowledge. “Most people confuse ‘self knowledge’ with knowledge of their conscious ego-personalities” (Jung, 1983, P. 356) and with this reductive attitude we renounce our right for genuine freedom and wholeness.

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