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A Post-Jungian Analysis of the Movie *Prince of Tides* Utilizing Archetypal Psychology Tools of James Hillman

Throughout the book *Re-Visioning Psychology*, author James Hillman suggests that the primary activity of psychology is “soul making.” He suggests throughout the work that psychology has avoided, lost or never grasped this activity as its fundamental purpose. In order to correct the situation, he offers a four part schema to address the problems of modern psychology and a return to “soul making” as the fundamental activity.

The four elements of the schema he suggests are: 1) Personifying or Imagining Things, (2) Pathologizing or Falling Apart, (3) Psychologizing or Seeing Through, and (4) De-humanizing or Soul-Making. Rather than just reiterating these elements, this paper will attempt to explain them by applying elements of this schema to the movie, *Prince of Tides*. By using the media of the film, we can apply these elements to enrich our understanding of Hillman and the enjoyment of the movie.

The *Prince of Tides* is a complex portrayal of a man (Tom Wingo), his nuclear family and his family of origin caught in a series of crises. Tom, who lives in South Carolina, is an out of work teacher/coach who is emotionally numb and who has consequently alienated and virtually abandoned his wife, who has fallen in love with another man who wishes to marry her. To further complicate matters, Tom’s twin sister,

Savannah has just tried to commit suicide for the third time. The psychiatrist treating Savannah has requested a member of the family to travel up to New York to provide assistance in helping understand what could motivate such self-destructive actions. Tom is selected to fulfill that function. As the drama unfolds, horrific events from the past come to light which offer the key to treating the sister, but help Tom discover the source of his own alienation. While in New York, Tom develops a relationship with the female psychiatrist treating his sister—a relationship which opens him up again on an emotional level and brings healing to his soul. In the end, there is healing and mystery, reconciliation and longing, as well as a deeper understanding of life and family.

Within the schema of Hillman, the character of Tom Wingo is a perfect description of someone who has become depersonalized. According to Hillman, “Personifying is a way of being in the world and *experiencing the world as a psychological field*, where persons are given with events, so that events are experiences that touch us, move us, appeal to us.” [13] In the case of Tom Wingo, however, there is no *joi de vivre*. Everything is odorless, colorless, and tasteless in Tom’s life. By being alienated from his anima, Wingo has virtually “lost” his soul. As Hillman puts it:

Clinically, loss of soul is spoken of as “depersonalization,” a condition in which the “personal coefficient” standing behind the ego and its relation with self and world is suddenly absent. All particular functions of ego-consciousness operate as before: associating, remembering, perceiving, feeling, and thinking are unimpaired. But one’s conviction in oneself as a person and the sense of reality of the world have departed. Everything and oneself become automatic, unreal, emptied out. The sense of “me-ness,” of emotional importance, has vanished, and now the world is as if behind glass; depth perspective no longer seems to function as near and far merge into flatland. [44]

Within this context, we can see that the experiences of Tom Wingo fall within the overall schema Hillman employs. We never really get a glimpse into the life and issues of his sister, but the movie is more about Tom and his journey of soul-making. Another aspect of personifying that Hillman discusses is the idea of memory, which will be central to the whole experience of the film. In terms of memory and personifying, Hillman states, “Memory not only records, it also confabulates, that is, it makes up imaginary happenings, wholly psychic events. Memory is a form imagination can borrow in order to make its personified images feel utterly real.” [18] So, part of the mystery of the film is to uncover the memories and see what monsters lurk in the past so powerfully that they would destroy young lives in the present.

Clearly the suicide attempt of Savannah is what Hillman would call “pathologizing”. However, Savannah’s pathologizing, while obvious, is not the only pathologizing going on. Tom’s situation, while less evident, is just as intense. Hillman’s reflection on Tom and all of us is:

For we are each peculiar; we have symptoms; we fail, and cannot see why we go wrong or even where, despite high hopes and good intentions. We are unable to set matters right, to understand what is taking place or be understood by those who would try. Our minds, feelings, wills, and behaviors deviate from normal ways. Our insights are impotent, or none come at all. Our feelings disappear in apathy; we worry and also don’t care. Destruction seeps out of us autonomously and we cannot redeem the broken trusts, hopes, loves. [55]

Most of us have been led to believe that pathologizing is a problem that must be corrected. Hillman, however asserts just the opposite. According to him:

Pathologizing is an iconoclasm; as such it becomes a primary way of soul-making. It breaks the soul free from its identification with ego and its life and the upper world heroes of light and high Gods who provide the ego with its models, and who have cast our consciousness in a one-sided, suppressive narrowness regarding life, health, and nature. Pathologizing

forces the soul to a consciousness of itself as different from the ego and its life—a consciousness that obeys its own laws of metaphorical enactment in intimate relation with death. [89]

Within this perspective, Hillman asserts that, “*The psyche does not exist without pathologizing*. Since the unconscious was discovered as an operative factor in every soul, pathologizing has been recognized as an inherent aspect of the interior personality.” [70] So the ubiquitous nature of Pathologizing is a natural part of being human. However, doesn’t suicide seem a little extreme for a natural process? Not according to Hillman.

In Hillman’s view, death is just another aspect of that process of Pathologizing. For him, “Only when things fall apart do they open up into new meanings; only when an everyday habit turns symptomatic, a natural function becomes an affliction, or the physical body appears in dreams as a pathologized image does a new significance dawn.” [111] According to Hillman, this is a totally natural process and “By beginning with the symptom, ‘a thing that is more foreign to the ego,’ pathologizing turns the entire psyche upon a new pivot: death becomes the center, and with it fantasies that lead right out of life.” [111]

Because of the emotional state that Tom is in at the start of the film, and since Tom and Savannah are twins, we can assume to some degree that their lives may be parallel. The movie never really delves into the treatment of Savannah, but what we see of Tom telling stories to Dr. Lowenstein, we witness a “classic” process of depth psychology: the telling of stories in order to lead to healing. In a sense, the psychiatrist is attempting to employ the third part of the Hillman schema, that of “seeing through” to the nature of the source of the pathology that has captured Savannah.

Unlike other aspects of Hillman's schema, the psychologizing aspect involves a process that can be delineated. The process of Psychologizing consists of :

First there is the psychological moment, a moment of reflection, wonder, puzzlement, initiated by the soul which intervenes and countervails what we are in the midst of doing, hearing, reading, watching. [140] I think this step was conveyed in the film when Wingo went to New York City. There he got outside of his usual routine and encountered dimensions of his life that he would avoid under normal circumstances: crowds, noise, pollution. In other words, he had no choice but to wonder and reflect in puzzlement.

Second, psychologizing justifies itself. As we penetrate or try to bring out, expose, or show why, we believe that what lies behind or within is truer and more real, powerful, or valuable than what is evident.[140] In this step, Tom was reluctant to share deep memories that were tightly contained within the taboos of a dysfunctional family system that insisted on maintaining secrecy. He needed to justify the telling of the family secret, knowing that he was betraying that system.

Third, the present event, the phenomenon before us, is given a narrative. [140] This particular process is very painful to Tom Wingo, who had to recall the rape of himself, his sister and his mother at the hands of three escaped convicts. Tom had repressed the memory of his own ordeal in this experience.

Fourth are the tools with which the operation proceeds. Here we return once again to ideas, for ideas are the soul's tools. Without them we cannot see, let alone see through. Ideas as the eyes of the soul give the psyche its power of insight, its means of prying open, stripping bare and going through. [141] Dr. Lowenstein gave Tom the idea that

Savannah would never be well unless he could tell her the family myth. The entire incident had been forced into silence by Tom's mother, who insisted the children never speak of that terrible night. However, through Tom's revelations we learn that the brother, Luke, who had died recently, was responsible for bringing about the end of the ravaging of his family by shooting and killing two of the convicts with a shotgun. The third was stabbed by the mother. Afterward, the children were forced to bury the bodies, clean up the blood and gore and then never speak of the ordeal.

So through this process of seeing through, we learn that the suicide attempt of Savannah was only a subsequent pathologizing, derived from the pathologizing silence of the horrific events they had undergone. All the children, including the dead brother were victims of that pathology of silence. So it was Savannah who carried the pathology of the family on her shoulders, and it was Tom who carried the cure on his. As Hillman states,

“Pathologizing is not only a metaphorical language but a way of translation, a way of turning something literally known, usual, and trivial like the psychopathologies of everyday life into something unknown and deep. As such, pathologizing is a hermeneutic which leads events into meaning. [111]

In other words, it was the pathologies they were all experiencing that eventually led to meaning.

After undergoing this process, was anyone healed? Again, according to Hillman, “As the psyche is never invulnerable to these movements, so it is never cured.”[111] In a sense, that's what the fourth element of the Hillman schema is about. On one level, everyone's life improves, but they will always carry the scars of their ordeal. The difference is they each claimed their story, the validity of their experience and the meaning inherent within that experience. They didn't suddenly become the poster

children for mental health, however. Through the process they each underwent, they entered a new phase of their journey. As Hillman puts it, “Through psychologizing I change the idea of any literal action at all—political, scientific, personal—into a metaphorical enactment.” [127] The way the movie ends, sums it up very well.

In the final scenes, there are vignettes of Tom reclaiming his family and his life. In the background, he says:

She [Dr. Lowenstein] changed me. For the first time I felt like I had something to give back to the women of my life. They deserved that. So I returned to my southern home and my southern life. And it is in the presence of my wife and children that I acknowledge my life, my destiny. I’m a teacher, a coach and a well loved man—and it is more than enough. In New York, I learned that I needed to love my mother and father and all their flawed, outrageous humanity. And in families, there are no crimes beyond forgiveness. But it is the mystery of life that sustains me now. And I look to the north and wish again that there were two lives apportioned to every man.

Based on the above quotation, Hillman would probably say, “but of course.” For in his schema, that is the mythic realm, the realm of mystery. As he states, “Rather than an increase of certainty there is a spread of mystery, which is both the precondition and consequence of revelation.” [142]

Certainly with the conclusion of the film, but throughout it as well we can see the dying and rising elements of the Tom Wingo character. Tom had to endure the descent into the hell of his own memories in order to engage the true mystery of his own experience. As Hillman puts it,

It is as if we must go through a death experience in order to let go of our clutch on life and on the viewpoints of the human world and its Aristotelian psychology. It is as if we do not recognize the full reality of anima until attacked by Hades, until invisible forces of the unconscious underworld overpower and make captive our normalcy. [208]

Based upon the action of the movie, I would say that Tom Wingo went through all four elements of the Hillman schema, and in the end achieved the reclamation of his own soul. I would say that the Dr. Lowenstein character was the personification of his anima, with which he had lost touch at the beginning of the film. The disintegration of his life was certainly a form of pathologizing. Undertaking the transmission of the family history and secret were aspects of the psychologizing, and ultimately the acceptance of the mystery of his life was the dehumanizing aspect.

One element of the Hillman schema we haven't explored much is that of dehumanizing. Among the concerns Hillman expresses is the over identification of the soul with the ego. In the film, *Prince of Tides*, there's a very interesting application of this problem. Perhaps the easiest way to express it is the question, who "owns" the story of one's life. The death of the brother Luke, while not directly attributable to the events of the family secret, must have been strongly influenced by that particular pathology. It was the death of Luke that triggered the soul crisis in the life of Tom Wingo. So you have the physical death of Luke, the soul death of Tom and the attempted suicide of Savannah. They all shared the same story, but none of them could claim it as theirs.

The mother, Lila, had ruthlessly enforced silence upon her children so that they were never allowed to speak of the horror they had experienced. Yet only within days of the event, was the first time that Savannah attempted suicide. Even to save Savannah's life, Lila was unwilling to allow Tom to share the story with the New York psychiatrist.

In a sense, Lila felt that it was her right to control "her" story—she was entitled to her privacy, regardless of the wants, needs or desires of the children. I thought for a while that this actually was a function of "personification", in the sense that it's "my story."

However, upon further reflection I think that in many ways Lila was more soul dead than Tom. She didn't have a "story." She had everything she wanted, but all she really had was a harvest of resentment and misery. Her pathology was her selfishness and she was totally unwilling or unable to psychologize her experience in order to break free from the past, so there was no soul-making going on in her life. Rather than soul building, Lila was trying to be "strong" in her understanding of that concept. As Hillman might say, she was "Ignoring the mythical nature of soul and its eternal urge out of life and toward images, humanism's psychology builds a strong man of frail soul trembling in the valley of existential dread." [209]

The interesting thing to me about this film is that no one was consciously trying to make "soul." They were not trying to mythologize or psychologize or anything. They were just trying to muddle through the ordinary events of their lives, and in so doing encountered some profound mysteries. Unknowingly, they were just "pathologizing," which according to Hillman,

"Pathologizing is a way of mythologizing. Pathologizing takes one out of blind immediacy, distorting one's focus upon the natural and actual by forcing one to ask what is within and behind it. The distortion is at the same time an enhancement and a new clarification, reminding the soul of its mythical existence." [99]

Interestingly, because she was an artist, Savannah probably was not looking for a cure or solution, because again according to Hillman, "The soul sees by means of affliction. Those who are most dependent upon the imagination for their work—poets, painters, fantasts—have not wanted their pathologizing degraded into the "unconscious" and subjected to clinical literalism." [107] She may have felt that she needed her pathology in order to be creative.

It is in the ordinariness of their pursuit that the characters in this movie actually embark on the process of working within myth. Hillman states the process eloquently when he says,

The revelation of myth within events confirms ambiguity, it does not settle it. Myth moves into meaning merely by taking one out of the literal objectivities, and the place to which myth carries one is not even a central meaning, or the center of meaning where things are supposed to feel certain. Instead we hover in puzzlement at the border where the true depths are. [142]

Based upon the commentary at the end of the movie, I suspect that is where Tom Wingo is, hovering in puzzlement somewhere near the border where the true depths are. A bit split, yet more whole than he has ever been in his whole life.

Interestingly, the therapeutic process displayed in this movie moved in more than one direction. The therapist, Dr. Lowenstein, had some pathologizing and other elements going on in her life, which became affected by the healing process of Tom Wingo. While Hillman doesn't discuss it in *Re-Visioning Psychology*, the movie demonstrates a kind of consequential interplay of persons in various stages of soul-making in their lives. If the film is a mirror of life, than like infinitely regressing mirrors we could apply the Hillman schema to an endless succession of scenarios in this movie. However, we will not.

Suffice it to say that this film conveys a great deal of the material Hillman was discussing in his book. Each of the four areas: personifying, pathologizing, psychologizing and dehumanizing have a great deal more to them than is revealed in the film. Each of the chapters are dense and multi-dimensional, but there are also things in the film which are outside the scope of the book. I think however, that the *Prince of Tides* and *Re-Visioning Psychology* are mutually illuminating and have a way of revealing the content of the other.

Works Cited

Prince of Tides, Columbia Pictures, 1991

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