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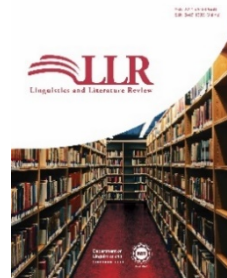
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Syzygy of Sexual Polarities: A Jungian Psychological Elucidation of *Ode to Grecian Urn*

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Abstract

This study examines the psychological symbolism in Keatsian poetry using analytical psychology. John Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' is steeped in psychological, symbolic, and analytical perspectives, which are essential components of Jungian psychology/archetypal analysis. The current study aims to scrutinize the psychological and symbolic perspectives of Keats's poem to understand the depth of psychic integration and archetypes in the text. This study analyzes 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' by deploying Carl Jung's concepts of syzygy or complementation of psychic *energies of* anima in the males and animus in the females. The term syzygy signifies a union of opposites like anima and animus and the conscious or collective unconscious. This process of complementation or complementary opposite of integration in the ode has symbolic interaction between the conscious male persona (animus) and the collective unconscious female persona (anima). Based on a close reading of the poem from a Jungian perspective, the current study provides a psychological understanding of poetic creation by underlying the conscious acts and thinking of the author as psychic interactions. This study aims to understand the symbolic representation of opposing psychic energies in Keatsian poetry. Moreover, the study analyzes the interpretation and the balance of male and female energies in Keats' poetry mean for the conscious and unconscious parts of the mind, and its effect on the poetic creativity and inner peace of the author. Thereby, the study elaborated that Keatsian poetry is a true depiction of Jungian psychology.

Keywords: archetype, anima/animus, conscious/collective unconscious, Jungian psychic, psychic integration, syzygy

Introduction

John Keats (1795–1821) is a renowned romantic poet whose interest in mythology and myth making encouraged his readers to read his odes from

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a Jungian perspective. He is one of the most celebrated literary poets of the 19th century. He wrote many influential poems by maintaining a poetic legacy and human emotions as his deep passion to explore human existence. Keatsian poetry was majorly influenced by great writers such as William Shakespeare, Milton, and Spenser. It is worth noting that among his many remarkably influential poems, Keatsian odes represent a new literary style, which is known for their ‘romantic ode meditative’. Keats’s poetry presents a mythic vision, which sub-stratum mythic themes in his poetry. Thus, his poetry fully exploited archetypal powers and psychic contemplation of human emotions without extra-literary design. Therefore, the current study aims to underline the Jungian archetypal psychic integration in ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ by highlighting analytical psychology a concept introduced by Carl Jung (1875-1961). Keatsian poetry can be viewed as a reaction to industrialization during the Age of Reason. The industrial revolution was characterized by materialistic consciousness, which gave rise to many social issues, such as the exploitation of humans, child labour, and class divisions. It is worth noting that romantics evidently targeted these concerning social circumstances.

Keats through his poetry expressed cogently the ideals, which were common among English romantics in the early nineteenth century. The early critical opinions regarding Keats’s poetry were not in favour of his poetic style, however, later critics described his poetics as worship of beauty (Blades, [2002](#)); Hellenistic poetry (Aske, [2005](#)), and even as the poetry of escapism (Barnard, [1987](#)). In a likewise manner, Cantor ([1984](#)) analyzed diverse perspectives about the English romantics and their propensity for myth-making,

What in fact makes the Romantic period so fascinating for a study of literary myth-making is that in their search for the one authentic mythic archetype, the Romantics kept broadening the range of possibilities for myth in literature. What ultimately unites the different writers [of the romantic period] is a set of common problems, centering around the question of whether one can recapture paradise. Each of these writers responds to this basic question in a different way and therefore shapes a different myth. (p. xviii)

According to Campbell ([2009](#)), myths are means of transmission of the spiritual potentialities of human life. In other words, myths are prime examples of searching for meaning in ‘life’, which helped romantic poets

to explore their own emotions and spiritual beliefs. When readers encounter psychic and mythological elements in literary texts, it allows them to explore their own feelings, beliefs, and values. Additionally, it helps them uncover the hidden messages and meanings within the works (Cantor, 1984).

The archetypal mythical theory was adopted into literary analysis in the mid-20th century by scholars such as Northrop Frye, Joseph Campbell, and Carl Jung, which explains the nature of the world and life as a whole. Jung (1959, 1966) and Campbell (1988, 2009) believed that archetypes could reveal our most repressed or hidden desires. Frye (1957), on the other hand, was not concerned with individuation or personal development at all; his concern was literary analysis and criticism. Primarily, Frye focused on literary archetypes such as the quest for motif and Jung investigated psychological archetypes such as anima and animus, whereas Campbell focused on both, viewing literature through mythological perspective. Jung and Frye believed that archetypes provided a framework for understanding the structure of human experience and symbolic expression, while Campbell focused on a mythical perspective to understand how stories can inform about the shared human nature. For Campbell, archetypes were ingrained in the collective unconscious that could be observed in the similarities between different cultural myths.

Keats' poetry deals with aspects of psychic energy and his vision of negative capability serves his mythic vision through the symbolic texture of poetics. Mythology and mythic vision not only built grounds for his poetry but also became a reason to build his mythic philosophy. It is evident to note that traces of Hindu and biblical references can be found in Keats's poetry. Psychic energy in Keats's poetry can be understood as the underlying force that drives all action and expression. Interaction between polarities of conscious and unconscious energies such as animus/anima can be seen as the source of creative energy, which breaks the barriers of time, expression, and co-existence. This interaction between psychic energies creates a powerful and symbolic representation of emotions, feelings, and understanding and how they get transferred intra or inter-personally. However, lopsided stress of the psyche can lead to psychological distress, which is an inability to experience true balance in life. This imbalance can lead to a disconnection between oneself and the environment, resulting in the difficulty in relationships leading to a decline in overall life satisfaction

(Jung, [2014](#)). This concept of balancing male and female energies not only applies to relationships with others but also to relationships with oneself. Keats's poetry, when read as a symbol of interaction between conscious and unconscious aspects of psychic energy suggested that a balanced connection between the two forces is required for poetic creativity and internal psychic harmony. The concept of balancing male and female energies in Keats' poetry is ultimately a metaphor for achieving equilibrium between conscious and unconscious aspects of the psyche. This psychic harmony can lead to a more balanced and fulfilled life. Thereby, deploying the Jungian perspective as an analytical tool to conduct psychic analysis, the current study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How does John Keats utilize mythology and myth making in his odes?
2. What insights can be gathered from reading “Ode on a Grecian Urn” as symbolic of interaction between the conscious and unconscious aspects of the human psyche?
3. How does the concept of balancing male and female energies in Keats' poetry symbolize the need for equilibrium between conscious and unconscious aspects of the psyche?

Theoretical Framework

The current study deploys Jungian psychotherapy as a prime tool for analytical psychology to understand the structure and function of the human psyche in ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’. Furthermore, the text is symbolic for both the interaction and exchange of psychic energy between the polarities of anima and animus in men and women, respectively. Jung believed that humans are androgynous from a psychological point of view such as having the characteristics or nature of both male and female. The conscious self of a man is often compensated by the anima in his unconscious and conversely the conscious self of a woman by the animus in her (Dawson, [2008](#); Khan, [2021](#)). These symbols are common in literature, society, religion, and other segments. For example, Bolen ([1989](#)) believed that gods and goddesses represent different qualities, whose contra-sexuality appears in both men and women. Recognizing that there are innate patterns or archetypes in every man and woman, therefore, the human psychic structure as understood in Jungian archetypal psychology differs, significantly from the Freudian perspective of the human psyche (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Jungian Archetypes in Human Psychic Makeup



Carl Jung coined the term 'syzygy' in his essay, 'The Syzygy: Anima and Animus', which appeared in *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self* in 1951. He used the term to refer to the union of the anima and animus or the opposites and discussed both the positive and negative aspects of this union (Dobson, [2005](#)). Although Jung was probably thinking of the Greek etymology of the term (*syzyga* meaning pair), 'syzygy' has a secondary meaning in astronomy referring to the alignment of the sun, earth, and a third celestial object such as the moon. This syzygetic pairing of opposites as envisaged by Jung would provide the theoretical and analytical framing of the text in this current research (see Figure 2). Jung ([1971](#)) explained the relationship between sexual opposites of anima or animus as stated:

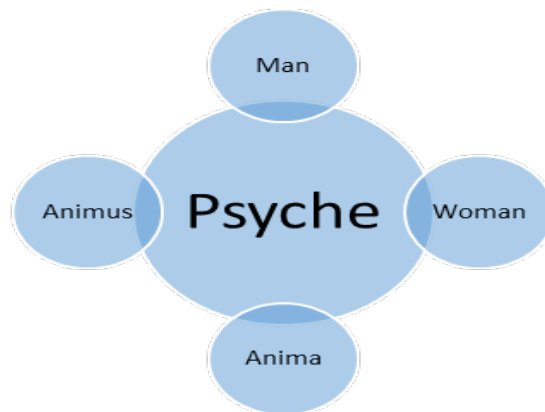
It is a psychological fact that as soon as we touch on these identifications, we enter the realm of the syzygies, the paired opposites, where the one is never separated from the other, and its antithesis. It is a field of personal experience, which leads directly to the experience of individuation, the attainment of the self. (p. 370)

The quaternity of the syzygial pattern as shown in Figure 2 provides a basis for the archetypal understanding of the human mind, motivation,

artistic creation, and poetic production. Wali (2011) observed that the conscious personality of males is affected by the anima, the unconscious 'syzygial' pair of men, whereas the conscious personality of women is affected by the animus. This four-sided contact opens up a vast world of 'syzygies' or completion for us, where the anima and animus combine together representing a whole. Jung further illustrated that in the process to become what and who we are, we must negotiate this complex network of psychological relationships within us. Therefore, in archetypal criticism, this interaction between the anima and animus is of main importance because any of the psychic polarities can be expressed in terms of their symbolic variants associated with feminine or masculine symbolism.

Figure 2

Quaternity of Sexual Opposites Comprising Man/Anima and Woman/Animus



As Lawson (2008) explained, the anima in men and the animus in women, which Jung called the soul image, is related to the persona. Similarly, the persona serves as the lens through which a person view the outside world, the anima and animus served as a connection of a person with his/her unconscious self. The animus has a male component in women, just as a woman represents the soul in a man. Despite being counterparts, the interaction between the two figures and the unconscious differs between the sexes. Similar to the shadow, the anima and animus frequently take the form of projection and usually target someone of the opposite sex.

Data Analysis

Romanticism as a particular phase was characterized by the evolution of

Western consciousness and creative reconnection as a key aspect of individual thinking. Individualism as a self-realization process does revolve around romantic imagination and their struggles to unify creativity as truth and true representation of self. This is why Keats's Odes examines and develop a new pattern of reconciliation to recollect and relocate the process of human maturation. Keatsian poetry does revolve around paradigms of harmonious Jungian principles and individualization, which synthesizes the significance of archetypes and ambivalent space that exists in human consciousness. Therefore, it is essentially significant for a human to get in touch with his/her conscious self from where creativity, dreams, and individualism arise. As Jung (1966) indicated,

The artist is wholly at one with the creative process, no matter whether he has deliberately made himself its spearhead, as it were, or whether it has made him its instrument so completely that he has lost all consciousness of this fact. In either case, the artist is so identified with his work that his intentions and his faculties are indistinguishable from the act of creation itself. (p. 75)

'Ode on a Grecian Urn' written in 1819 in the spring season along with other four odes, this poem celebrates the artistic perfection of a classic urn, as well as the preservative power of art. Unlike, 'Ode to Psyche', in this ode the persona taps into the anima energy, which is not only symbolically manifested by the figures depicted on it, but also become evident through the shape of the urn. The urn has the contours of the female body. For the persona (animus), this mysterious figure is a source of tantalizing attraction. Like the anima archetype—mysterious and undefined—the urn lures the animus onto itself but defies rational understanding and does not provide answers.

Three times the persona tries to engage the urn in an imaginary conversation. Like the archetypes in the human psyche, the Grecian Urn has passed generationally. The persona feels as if it exists outside of time and is a manifestation of eternity. Therefore, it addresses the urn, each time asking different questions, in order to solicit answers from the urn to the question of human mortality and natural decay in the face of the immortality of the urn. Before asking the questions, the urn is addressed as (Keats, 2009)¹:

¹ All subsequent references to lines taken from 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' are to this source of Keats' poetry.

“Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
 Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
 Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
 A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme”. (Lines, 1—4)

The Urn is a virgin bride; it is quiet and the ‘foster-child’ of ‘slow time’ and a ‘sylvan historian’ who tells a ‘flowery tale’. The cluster of images given in these lines feminizes the urn and sets the ground for later ‘syzygial’ interaction between animus (the persona) and anima (the urn). Thus, the image of the urn is formed by fertility, nourishment, and kinship with nature. The image is predominantly that of a female, from the virgin bride to the friend and narrator of tales of nature. Nature, being the spirit of the earth, represents the female side of the psyche because of its immediate connotative connection with the mother earth archetype. With her nourishment and vitality, which is constantly fed into all the living forms on the face of the earth, be it plants, animals or humans.

Connection with the unconscious is established through the projection of the anima onto the urn. As if a young man has fallen in love with the girl of his dreams, whom he just came across by accident, the urn becomes a source of elation and inspiration for the persona, which instigates its imaginative unification with the Urn and its passionate and relentless questions.

What leaf-fring'd legend haunt about thy shape
 Of deities or mortals, or of both,
 In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
 What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
 What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
 What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy? (Lines, 5—10)

The analogy can be taken further to say that the persona acts as if it were a suitor courting the urn to elicit an answer from it, which it is reluctant to do. Similarly, the urn is feminine as well as ancient, characterized by qualities such as having a ‘leaf-fring'd legend’, as well as the depiction of deities and gods on its surface. Besides the images related to gods and legends, human figures are also depicted on the urn, such as the ‘mad pursuit’ of the beloved by the lover and the ‘wild ecstasy’ of ‘pipes and timbrels’.

The anima energy, thus accessed by the persona, instigates it to a level

of epiphany with the urn when the persona tries to unravel the mysteries of what is depicted on it. The scenes and figures on the Urn come to life:

“Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter: therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone”. (Lines, 11—14)

The unheard music of the piper, depicted on the Urn, playing ‘ditties of no tone’ to the spirit of the persona, is the beginning of the imaginative identification of the persona with the Urn. Unlike the song of the ‘immortal bird’ in ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, the music the persona hears is tuneless but still audible, not to the sensual ears but to the spirit deep in the center of the psyche. Here is a striking verbal communication of a poet’s feeling, which he has at the time of genuine poetic inspiration. The tune that he hears is not actually there, but it is a poet’s imagination, which makes it so real, so intensely audible, that it was felt deeper than the music that was audible to the ears.

From a Jungian perspective, moments of psychic integration bring us closer to the primordial emotions and instincts which are there all the time but not perceived by the center of consciousness, the ego. For fresh energy and vitality to flow into consciousness, it is, therefore, necessary that the window to the sea of the unconscious should be kept open. The complementary or ‘syzygial’ nature of the anima / animus principles necessitates it upon us to go through the process of integration like a mythic hero, in order to discover ourselves as a new being.

Keatsian poetry can be seen as a reaction against the culture of the time he was living in. The Age of Reason perpetuated its preference for rational and schematic thinking at the expense of other faculties of humans such as feelings, intuition, and the irrational that have been the source of knowledge and insight for humans since prehistoric times. The theme of psychic integration further got advanced in the following lines:

Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal - yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair! (Lines, 15—20)

‘Fair youth’, sings a song that is never-ending and eternal. In psychic terms, the song is a symbol of the ideal harmony between the opposite polarities of psychic energy. Humans cannot leave the song because it is the necessity of psychic urge, which drives towards fulfillment and achievement of harmony. The song of the soul has to be heard if one is to lead a meaningful life of eternal bliss. Those who choose not to listen to the song from inside our beings are prone to psychic problems when their unconsciousness turns upon them in the form of mental ailment.

The green tree, an archetypal symbol, represents consciousness, vitality, and life itself. the tree of Life in many cultures and religious mythologies is a symbol of vitality and life (Campbell, [2009](#), [1988](#)). The foliage and photosynthetic processes of the tree represent consciousness and vitality. It is also a symbol of the growth of the continuous process of change in nature, both human and non-human. The tree is the source, the initiator of knowledge, being the bearer of the ‘forbidden fruit’. In the myth of the origin of life, humans took the first initiative toward conscious decision-making by choosing to listen to what the snake said. They chose to taste the fruit of their choice. As a result, they were thrown into a world of polarities and opposites. Before they were thrown into the temporal world, they were not aware of male/ female, sin/ virtue, right/ wrong, light/ dark, good/evil, and other dichotomies.

The image of the tree, with a flute/pipe player underneath, has primordial appeal to our basic psychic structure. It resonates a chord in our mind that is ancient as well as modern. It is an archetypal symbol of what Jung calls ‘the collective unconscious’ (Jung, [1959](#)). The nature of the collective unconscious is ageless. It is as relevant today as it was ages ago because it guides us toward a life of harmony. The emergence of archetypal symbols and images in cultures widely separated from one another in time and space can be explained as a manifestation of a basic underlying psychic structure or pattern that is shared by the human race. As Jung indicated ([1966](#))

A primordial image or archetype] is a figure – be it a daemon, a human being, or a process – that constantly recurs in the course of history and appears wherever creative fantasy is freely expressed. They give form to countless typical experiences of our ancestors. They are the psychic residue of innumerable experiences of the same type projected into the manifold figures of the mythological

pantheon. (p. 81)

The tree of life is one such archetypal and mythical symbol that stands both for life and for the unconscious. Born out of the union of the Earth and Sun, the tree is a symbol of the union of female and male principles, respectively. It is the totality of being; hence, it is a symbol of harmony between the polarities of the psyche.

It takes the reader to yet another *syzygial* motif in mythology—the Mother Earth and the Father Sun. This theme has been repeatedly used in many cultures, where the earth is associated with female or anima qualities, such as fertility, nourishment, and accommodation, while Sun is associated with male or animus qualities such as order, reason, discipline, and others. If we consider this symbolism against the background of this mythological motif, growth of a tree, for example, assumes a grander and more significant symbolic meaning, signifying symbolic representation of the ideal of harmony between the female and male principles in our lives and in our psyche.

In a similar image, the bold lover in pursuit of his beloved is mentioned immediately after the piper under the tree. The piper, the ‘fair youth’, pursues his beloved through music. His song is eternal and the tree overhead would be evergreen. The bold lover, ‘though winning near the goal’, cannot kiss his beloved. However, his love, like the music and the tree, is everlasting. He would pursue her forever and she would stay young and beautiful. In this image, the eternal drama of the pursuit of the integration of opposites in the human psyche is summarized in symbolic terms. The need, the urge, for integration of the feminine and the masculine, is the eternal need of the individual as well as the society for fulfillment and harmony.

The quest for fulfillment of life through the integration of these opposites and the need for the achievement of individuation is an unconscious one that needs to be brought to consciousness for realization. The balance, perfect integration between the anima and animus, being an ideal state, cannot be realized fully. Nevertheless, to achieve this ideal is what the quest is all about. ‘Though winning near’ the goal, the bold lover can never achieve integration with his anima energy, but the urge and necessity of achievement of the self would drive him to try to take the kiss and be integrated with the anima.

The joy and relish, of the persona in the world of the ‘Attic shape’ is expressed in terms of love-making. After the description of the ‘bold lover’ ‘winning near the goal’ but would never be able to kiss his beloved, the persona expresses its joy thus:

“More happy love! more happy, happy love!
 For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
 Forever panting, and forever young;
 All breathing human passion far above,
 That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
 A burning forehead, and a parching tongue” (Lines, 25—30)

The imagery in these lines is steeped in love, warmth, breathless emotions, youth, passion, and thirst for the union. The union of the opposites is a productive phenomenon, yielding fertile imagination and creativity. The lovemaking imagery in these lines, if looked at as expressive of primeval impulses, is the union of the persona with the neglected side of its psyche—the anima. The resulting passion, ardour, and breathlessness are images that convey that zest for life, achieved because of this union. These complimentary opposites are not confined, or limited, to the individual, but are a part of the universal unconscious, which all humans share in the form of psychic potential for certain types of behavior and thinking. Archetypal images are latent potentials and if we are to realize them, they need to be accessed through active imagination. The imaginative participation of the people’s persona in the real world depicted by the urn corresponds to what Jung (2014) says about creative fantasy:

It [fantasy] is, pre-eminently, the creative activity from which the answers to all unanswerable questions come; it is the mother of all possibilities, where, like all psychological opposites, the inner and outer worlds are joined together in a living union. Fantasy it was and ever is which fashions the bridge between the irreconcilable claims of subject and object, introversion and extroversion. In fantasy alone, both mechanisms are united. (p.52)

The identification of the persona with the Urn and its people is an excellent example of active imagination in the process. The creative fantasy enables the persona to access not only the world of the people on the urn but also establishes a productive union between parts of its psyche, which are opposite but complementary—the animus and anima. It is made possible

through a flight of imagination, between the ‘the inner and outer worlds, which are joined together in living union’ in the psyche of the persona.

Such images, having an archetypal association, strike a deep corresponding cord in the mind of the reader, because the author shares the same psychic blueprint as the persona itself. The universal appeal of poetry may be explained from this perspective. The poet, as a seer, is in touch with those primal tendencies of the human psyche, which are shared by all his fellow human beings. The poet can communicate the truth that reaches the heart of people from diverse social, national, and ethnic backgrounds, living in different times. The poet is the speaker of the eternal message:

“Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!” (Lines, 44—45)

The persona is ‘teased’ by eternity as it instigates its imagination to be a vessel to convey its message. The persona serves it by bringing to the common person realities that they sometimes chose to forget and suffer because of it. The persona describes the urn as a ‘cold pastoral’, a ‘silent form’, which teases it out of thought due to its silence. Silence, in this context, is reminiscent of eternity. Eternity, like the universal unconscious, is ageless and infinite. It can be approximated through art and poetry, as it is accessed in the current analysis through the archetypal analysis of anima and animus by implementing Jung analytical psychology.

Conclusion

The current study contended that myths, dreams, culture, and religion are a part of collective unconsciousness, which forms archetypes. Keats’s poetry revolves around anima, which is the central principle of Jung’s theory of anthropomorphic archetypes. It is significant to note that this abstract symbol of the unconscious mind had been suppressed by prevailing cultural norms during the revolutionary years of England. Keats’s poetic persona remained evident in his six Odes, which present a conflicting nature of the inner and outer world by presenting a duality and subjectivity of human nature. Keats’s poetry shows us that for such psychic integrity, the necessity of a holistic environment cannot be overlooked.

Keats’ imaginative world in ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ offers a pattern of complementation in terms of the “syzygial” integration of contra-sexual opposites of anima/ animus archetypes. From a Jungian perspective, Keats’s poetry is a figurative representation of the unconscious (anima), which

complements the conscious aspects of a male persona (animus). The anima imagery is associated with the feminine aspect of the unconscious in man, which points to a need for ongoing complementation of the ego aspect. Through the story of the urn and the lovers, Jungian archetypal perspective draws on the shadowed persona of 'self', which makes the poem an enduring tale of the human desire for psychic complementation. The collective unconscious sides of the male and female psyche cover a variety of human experiences, which helps in the development of archetypes. These archetypes are a representation of social innate patterns that truly helps in developing an individual identity, which is a productive part of the conscious ego.

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