

The Hero-Heroine as Image and Representation of the Androgyne

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Abstract

Starting as a fabulous bisexual human being, the Androgyne was soon punished by the gods when trying to place itself above them. Plato describes the Androgyne as a perfect roundness: a single body having four arms, four legs and one head with two opposed faces. Because of its pride, the Androgyne was cut in the middle and the face was turned backwards. Considering this definition, the myth of the Androgyne was used by Plato to sustain his thesis upon love: the two halves left alone in the world are trying desperately to find each other in order to recreate the initial form. The same myth was also found in the early religions, reflecting the unity between the Earth and the Sky. This study follows the Plato's tradition and identifies the modern Androgyne in different literary characters in few of the very well known literary masterpieces.

Keywords: *Androgyne, hero-heroine, Self, other, representation.*

The Myth of the Androgyne – the Starting Point

One of the most interesting figures in mythology could be considered the Androgyne, because of its intriguing shape, because of its story, because of the fact that it is always contemporary with the present understanding of the human soul, or maybe because it is a metaphorical explanation of human wondering on Earth in the attempt of finding the other half and recreating the whole again. There were not so many figures in mythology that inspired the writers as the Androgyne.

One of the first philosophers that referred to the myth of the Androgyne was Plato, in the essay *The Symposium*. He considered the Androgyne as a bisexual being, made of two halves: one male and one female. The male half may symbolize the Sun while the female half stands for the Earth. For the Platonic philosophy, it is common to use the image of the Androgyne as a micro-universe

in a permanent relationship with the whole universe. Because of their round shape¹ and of the symbols they represent – the macro-universe and the micro-universe, the Sun and the Androgyne reflect each other's images, but on a different scale. Thus, the Androgyne becomes a small representation on Earth of the immense Sun, standing as a symbol of perfection.

*The original human nature was not like the present one, but different. The sexes were not two, as they are now, but originally three in number, there was man, woman and a union of the two, having a name corresponding to this double nature, which one had a real existence, but is now lost, and the word Androgynous is only preserved as a term of reproach.*²

The Androgyne is described as a strange creature, with his back and sides forming a circle, having “a head with two faces looking in opposite ways and set on a round neck”.³

According to Plato, the Androgyne is a very powerful being, having a strong pride that, as it considered, allows it to aspire to the statute of the God. This was the reason why the Gods decided to cut the Androgyne in half and to let it wondering in the world during its entire life. In order to destroy its pride, the Androgyne is now meant to find the other half and to reunite with it; but all its attempts are never put to an end, it continues to search for its destined half and will never find it.

*The Androgynes dared to scale the heavens and they made an attack to the Gods. Thus the Gods took council and discovered a way to humble their pride and improve their manner. They continue to exist but they cut them in two like an apple which he halved for pickling. After the division, the two parts of man (the Androgyne) each desiring his other half, come together and throwing their arms around one another, longing to grow into one.*⁴

The cutting decided by the Gods should be understood as an imposition of the moral norms. Most of the Ancient literary works that deal with the myth of the Androgyne are concentrated upon the nostalgia developed after the moment of cutting under the erotic interpretation. Philosophers such Empedocles, Protagoras or Plato refer to the myth of the Androgyne as to an opportunity of staging in an allegorical manner the old legends. Considering the myths as huge amounts of old

¹ The round shape is considered in Ancient philosophy to be the shape that stands for perfection.

² Platon, *Banchetul* (The Symposium) (Timișoara: de Vest, 1992), 37 / online translation: trans. Benjamin Jowet, *Great Books of the Western World*, Chapter 7, 157, classics.mit.edu/Plato/symposium.html.

³ Platon, *Banchetul*, 38 / online translation, 158.

⁴ Platon, *Banchetul*, 39 / online translation, 161.

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symbols, most of the Ancient philosophers used them in order to veil the moral and philosophical ideas, in order to make their philosophy more approachable.⁵

The permanent possibility of re-creating the whole Androgyne is considered to be the only opportunity of finding true happiness, of starting the process of re-integration of the two halves into the initial state. From the psychological point of view, this initial state was identified to be the bliss generated by the origin of the human being. For Gustav Jung the Self represents a wholeness of a double nature (conscious and unconscious); the psychological process of individuation is explained as being a real absorption of both the consciousness and the unconsciousness. The human Self is in search for the initial bliss when there was a perfect harmony between the two parts involved in the process of re-creating the primordial unity.⁶

The same bliss is very often found in the archaic religions from India, Greece and in the Judeo-Christian legends. Even if the theory of Gustav Jung places the bliss, previously introduced, at the beginning of a person's life, this does not mean that the science of psychology has a mythical structure and neither that it assumes a mythical and archaic theme.⁷ The only similar approach between the psychoanalysis and the archaic conception regarding the bliss and origin of the human being stands in the decisive influence of the primordial time that governs the first years of any person's childhood, upon each individual life.⁸

The Myth of the Androgyne in Different Cultures

The idea of primordial unity of the human being could be identified in most of the Ancient culture including the well-known Indian, the Greek and the Judeo-Christian myths and legends. The same idea could be found in the old Japanese mythology. In this case, it is introduced the primordial pair of Izanagy and Izanamy who represent the two principles of the Japanese cosmogony. Starting as a primordial bi-unity, the Androgyne experiments a series of dramatic hierophanies and in the end it suffers a symbolic cutting that stands for the separation

⁵ For fear not to lose the meaning of the moral and philosophical ideas, some of the Ancient philosophers considered to be more appropriate to stage most of their discourses. Coming in the form of a dialogue, the philosophical debate became easier to be understood and assumed. Furthermore, using the mythological symbols the debate could be accessed by anyone.

⁶ Gustav Jung, "Die Psychologie der Ubertragung" (Psychology of the Transference), in *The Practice of Psychotherapy: The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, vol. 16, trans. R.F.C. Hull (New York: Princeton University Press, 1966), 163-182.

⁷ The science of psychology must not be related to the Judeo-Christian mythology based on the concept of Paradise and on the concept of Falling.

⁸ The psychological analysis refers to the bliss that belongs to the period before the cutting, when time was not lived yet.

between the Earth and the Sky, between Life and Death. The Japanese myth refers to the primordial bliss as a “coincidentia oppositorum”.⁹ The phenomenon of Androgyny becomes more complex, meaning the coexistence of both sexes in the same divinity and also the universal and archaic pattern that stands for the idea of totality. More than a state of wholeness, the Androgyny symbolises the accomplishment of the unconditioned and primordial state. According to this myth, the cosmogony starts with the separation between the Earth and the Sky, then the primordial Androgyne changes into a reed from which a great number of Gods will be born. Only after the separation between the two principles, there could begin the search, the wondering on Earth in the attempt to find the other half, the other part of the unity. The myth ends with an expected hiero-gamy that coincides with the re-creation of the whole again. The Mother-Earth dies in order to give birth to the Fire (the counterpart of the Sun) and to other telluric Gods.¹⁰ Thus, the legend of creation ends with the hiero-gamy followed by death that, in its turn, is followed by birth and so on, exemplifying the circle of life and death and its meaning.¹¹

Another example of the existence of the myth of the Androgyne is present in the Jewish Ancient texts, such as *Kabala*. In the archaic civilizations the Androgyne is considered the perfect type of man. The Ancient scholars consider that in order to accomplish the human status, a person needs to fulfil the Androgyne condition. Even if this condition seems a regression, it represents a return to the primordial time, to an undetermined and pre-formal state, similar to the bliss already discussed. In the Jewish tradition, this state could be identified with the archetypal image of the first man on Earth, Adam, who has no self-consciousness. The episode of Eve’s birth from Adam’s rib, gave the opportunity of theological and philosophical debates. If Eve was created from Adam’s rib, it presupposes that Adam was an Androgyne. Eve’s birth may be considered as the splitting the whole in two parts: male and female. This time is not the Gods who did the cutting but God, but because of the same reason: the pride.¹²

The Indian mythology refers to Yama,¹³ the first man on Earth. According to this legend Yama had a sister, Yami, from whom he was brutally separated. The same primordial couple appears also in the Iranian mythology, this time embodied

⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Arta de a muri* (The Art of Dying) (Iași: Moldova, 1993), 178.

¹⁰ The last motif refers to the moment of creation of the vegetal world. The birth of plants coincides with the death of Izanamy, seen as a sacrifice in the name of any life form.

¹¹ Eliade, *Arta de a muri*, 178.

¹² Mircea Eliade, *Aspecte ale mitului* (Aspects of Myth) (Bucharest: Univers, 1978), 124.

¹³ The translation of the term Yama is *twin*.

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by Yima, the male figure, and Yimal, the female figure. Both these pairs represent another version of the Androgyne parted in two primordial figures.

There are also Ancient cultures that consider the Androgyne to be the nature of gods. The mythology of the Ancient Egypt describes such a divine fire embodied by Huh, the God of Eternity. The same type of Androgynous divine figure was imagined by the Abenaki, a native American tribe. They used to pray to the Tabalak, the supreme God, the creator of the entire world.¹⁴

The concept of the Androgyne could also be understood as a merger of the opposites into the same human being. Most of the ceremonies of initiation developed by the primitive societies have the only purpose of re-uniting the opposites, of re-creating the primordial Androginic state. For example, a native Australian was not considered of having any human dignity before the ceremony of initiation. He is treated as a masculine virtual being. In order to become a man, he has to pass a specific ceremony that reveals himself the cosmology and the theology of his tribe in relation to his Androgyny and sexuality. He has to deal with several rituals of apparently opposite meaning that are meant to unify him with the opposite sex. The meaning of these ceremonies is the following: no one can become a man or woman if he or she did not reach before the Androginic state. The human condition itself is considered to be tragic because of its polarity and it is impossible to be assumed if the next human being did not find the primordial state of perfection and bliss that the ancestors fulfilled at the moment when they were not Adams or Eves, but Adam-Eve.¹⁵ Only after these preliminary transformations of re-uniting the whole and halving it again, a human being will be able to experiment life as it is.

The Myth of the Androgyne in Literature

In the Ancient texts as well as in the medieval ones, the figure of the Androgyne is to be found in the human being that is capable to harmonize the contraries. The most representative character in the Ancient literature is Hermaphroditus. Taken from Ovidiu's *Metamorphosis*, this Androgyne is close to the image of a human being. As opposed to the Ancient Androgyne, Hermaphroditus felt the primordial harmony and bliss as an infirmity. He was born after the union between the nymph Salmacis and a young shepherd, offspring of Aphrodite and Hermes.¹⁶ Having a divine and an earthly nature, he is neither man

¹⁴ Mircea Eliade, *Mitul reînegrării* (The Myth of Reinstatement) (Bucharest: Vremea, 1942), 67.

¹⁵ Eliade, *Mitul reînegrării*, 98.

¹⁶ Ovidius, *Metamorfoze* (Metamorphosis) (Bucharest: Științifică, 1972), 32.

nor god. He also lacks the possibility of choosing one of the alternatives – that is being a male or a female, because he is neither of them but both of them. He regards his particular identity as a form of uniqueness. He curses the water in which he has bathed and which has transformed him entirely and his pray was fulfilled.

Another representative literary figure is Dante's character from *The Divine Comedy*. The same act of union between the nymph Salmacis and the young shepherd is now considered a sin.¹⁷ The perspective is totally changed. The Androgyne becomes now a character in an unnatural state, far from the original bliss. As any sin must be punished, the same thing will happen with this Androginic figure. The medieval mentality does not approve the possibility of existence of such a character, nor of unnatural relationships. For the Ancient version of the Androgyne, it was the Hermaphroditus the one to be blamed, but now all those involved are to be punished. On the seventh stage of the Purgatory, Dante and his guide find those who suffer because of the same sin, the one of unnatural relationships. The image of the Androgyne is changed completely: from the Ancient figure of God, then of the human being, then of one particular figure into a sin.

Continuing the search into the literary field the image and/or the concept of the Androgyne turn into a manner of artistic thinking. It is now the artistic imagination that needs to explore and revise the traditional Androgyne that is no more an outside figure but a part of the mind, a part of the inner self. Thus, the artistic imagination is to be considered a bipolar gender, containing the male and the female way of thinking and creating.

During the Romantic period, the writers tended to assume the other gender as a source of imagination. The two genders influence each other, fear and love each other, both are trying to mirror the other's image but not as they are but deformed by each creative mind. The *other* is no longer, the one that is different but the one that is similar and even more that is the same as the self image. This process could be possible because of the self projection into the other and because of the assuming the other's image into one's self.

Going further, the Modern period represents an opportunity of co-existence of the two genders into the same self. It is no longer a self-projection into the *other*, but the self and the *other* in the same Androgynous creative mind. The *other*

¹⁷ Dante Alighieri, *Divina Comedie* (The Divine Comedy) (Bucharest: pentru Literatura Universală, 1965), 317.

is integrated into the same self, creating a unity that is meant to become identical.¹⁸ In their literary works, the writers fantasized about a relationship between the two sides of the same self, sometimes in a perfect symbiosis, sometimes in an agony over the loss of the self-identity.

A good example in this respect could be the fantastic novel *Séraphita* written by Balzac. In this case, the Androgyne is considered the image of the perfect human being. Living in a castle near Jarvis, the main character seems to hide a secret which does not belong to his/her past, but to the structure of his/her own existence. Being in love with Minni, for whom he appears as Séraphitus, a young man; he is also beloved by Wilfred, for whom he is Séraphita, a beautiful woman. Being both a man and a woman, Séraphitus / Séraphita experiences a terrestrial life as well as a divine life at the same time. The last perfect deed that he/she needs to do in order to become perfect is to love, at the same time, two other persons, a man and a woman. Balzac's character was destined to become a perfect human being and very soon an angel; his/her gender stands only in the eyes of the other, the one who gaze at him / her. This character is able to recognize himself/herself as a "total human being,"¹⁹ but the others still continue to distinguish the two sides of the same whole.

If it is to exemplify this symbiosis of the two selves, it is Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* the best choice to be made. The main character of the story is Orlando, a young man, born in England during the reign of Elizabeth the first. After a series of love affairs that lasted from the sixteenth century to the twentieth and that took him to Russia, back to England, then to Constantinople, and again to England, Orlando finds himself metamorphosed into a woman.²⁰ Opposed to Kafka's *Metamorphosis* or to Ionesco's *The Rhinos*, Orlando's metamorphosis did not take him by surprise in fact he/she felt no difference. In this novel Virginia Woolf suggested that gender roles are not biological but societal and psychological. Furthermore, Orlando's change was reflected in his single writing which was the poem *The Oak Tree*. Started as a mythological drama, to the end of the novel, it turned into an epic poem. Here Orlando developed his/her own selves as a hero/heroine, realizing the he / she is made of hundreds of selves and experiences that are combined in order to form the present s/he at the present moment. The historical periods represent for the modern hero-heroine images of the personal

¹⁸ Tzvetlan Todorov, *Cucerirea Americii. Problema celuilalt* (The Conquest of America. The Problem of the Other) (Iași: Institutul European, 1994), 173.

¹⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Mefistofel și Androginul* (Mephistopheles and the Androgyne) (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1995), 92.

²⁰ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (London: Hogarth Press, 1928), 213-227.

consciousness, but these images are reflected by the same mind, the mind of the Androgyne. Using the myth in discussion, Virginia Woolf follows the character's free thoughts in a perfect stream-of-consciousness literary technique, unifying two different perspectives into one actor/actant image that is a perfect representation of the modern Androgyne.

If the Modern literary period represented an opportunity to develop the artistic imagination of the self, the Contemporary literary period revealed itself as a dialogue between the whole gender identities of male gender and female gender inter-connected one another. From the psychological point of view it is a double-voiced discourse. The self no longer communicates his / her thoughts, ideas, concepts, etc., but also it includes the other selves in his / her acts of speech. This new type of discourse that no longer aims only to communicate something but to self-communicate, is sustained by the embracing the rhetorical, epistemological and ontological differences between the genders. It reveals all the voices that are engaged in the discourse. According to Derrida's point of view, developed in his *Of Grammatology*,²¹ everything is now a discourse or comes into a discourse form, there could be said that the Ancient Androgyne after suffering a series of dramatic changes, turned into a form of a discourse that is destined to communicate itself and also to include the other's discourse that communicate itself, that, in its turn, includes the other's discourse too, and so on.

The purpose of this study is to briefly notice the evolution of the concept of the Androgyne, from the status of a myth and legend to the status of a psychological and literary theme. The literary works selected are few of the very well known. Except the writers mentioned, there were others who wrote literary pieces inspired from the idea of the Androgyne, such as Sar Péladan, Swinburne, Baudelaire, Huysmans. Their Androgyne is more sensual, changing the metaphysical meaning of the perfect human beings into morbid hermaphrodites. It is the moment when the Androgyne as a symbol started to downgrade. Each literary period contains different representations of the Androgyne.

Before becoming philosophical concepts, the idea of the One, of the Unity or of the Totality represented cultural forms that revealed themselves through myths and legends fulfilled in rituals and mystic incantations. Belonging to the pre-systemic way of thinking, the mystery of Totality was meant to reflect the necessity of any human being to accede to a new perspective which cancels the contraries.²² The fact that the Androgyne represents an archaic myth and legend

²¹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (New York: John Hopkins University Press, 1974), 213.

²² Eliade, *Mefistofel și Androginul*, 116.

later developed into a literary motif and theme, shows that it is part of the human drama. It could still be found under different aspects – mystic theology, philosophy, mythology, folklore and literature.

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