

THEORIES OF SYMBOLISM

# Psychoanalytic Symbols



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# **PSYCHOANALYTIC SYMBOLS**

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# SYCHOANALYTIC SYMBOLS

## PSYCHOANALYTIC AND SECONDARY SYMBOLS

The Psychoanalytic Symbol was best described by Ernest Jones (1916). He noted that a Psychoanalytic symbol is formed when there has been repression of the abstract connection between a representation (manifest symbolic form) and that, which is represented (latent symbol). His exact words are,

"In most uses of the word, a symbol is a manifest expression for an idea that is more or less hidden, secret or kept in reserve. Most typically of all, the person employing the symbol is not even conscious of what it actually represents . . . Symbols (are) made spontaneously . . . and, in the broad sense of the word, unconsciously. The stricter the sense in which this is used, the truer is the statement" (p. 90). "Only what is repressed needs to be symbolized. This conclusion is the touchstone of the psychoanalytic theory of symbolism." (p. 116).

Schilder (1938) made an observation in children that described the dynamic motivation that propels this process when he noted that "Symbols . . . will only occur when the process of experimentation has been prematurely interrupted and the child is afraid . . . (of) interrupted or forbidden drives." (P 25) and ". . . threats which originate either from the situation or from the attitude of adults." (P 24) Recent extensive reviews of the topic are to be found in Donadeo (1974), Blum (1978) and Rose (2000 p 456)

The initial step in the selection of a manifest psychoanalytic symbol, that will permit a concept that is driven toward conscious awareness to circumvent censorship, involves matching latent concepts to related less affectively charged preconscious representations within the concept cluster to which the latent content belongs. Concept clusters consist of verbal, visual, or musical elements. In the next step the abstract connection between the latent concept and potential representations within the concept cluster are lost to the focus of awareness. This occurs when the focus of awareness is shifted to a manifest representation, within the concept cluster, which has been selected because it is the least affect charged and most removed in form from the latent concept. This shift of awareness is called countercathesis.

Countercathesis as a term refers to the acceptance into consciousness of a symbolic carrier, which

carries in extremely defused form the strong affects associated with latent contents and wishes. Manifest representations are symbolic carriers with altered affect. They obscure while expressing and discharging the affects of latent wishes. All other remaining potential representations within the concept cluster are considered to be repressed. This is a function of the observation that consciousness and memory are mutually exclusive. The process of exclusion from consciousness leaves the other representations unknown, hidden, (latent), and huddled with the core concept in the "repressed" reaches of the System Unconscious.

Psychoanalytic symbolic representations are not products of the moment. The concept clusters from which they are derived are created by complex organizations of defense. Manifest symbol contents are drawn from historical traditions as well as from open social and closed familial networks of experience and acquired meanings. Non-psychoanalytic symbols are not the products of counteracthesis. The process of finding a representation is more direct in that a consciously selected manifest signifier is chosen as a representation.

### **PIAGET AND SECONDARY SYMBOLS**

Piaget (1951) calls a symbol that is a manifest expression of an hidden idea "a secondary symbol" (Ch 7). The term "primary symbol" is reserved in his theory of symbols for the simple symbol. Piaget recognized an identity between his secondary symbol and the psychoanalytic symbol as well as the role of repression in the latter's formation. However he included poetic symbols as well in his concept of the secondary symbol. This exception should be noted.

Piaget's concept of "secondary symbol" includes the possibility of a latent content for a cryptic symbol, which is not repressed, but is to be found in new awarenesses and insights for which there are neither prior experiences or practiced expressions. He denied repression a role as the only source of unconscious content. He recognized a type of secondary symbol with unconscious roots whose repression free latent content had entered the portals of the unconscious in the form of an awareness for which there were not yet fully expressive words. saying ". . . unconscious symbolism, extends far beyond the field of what can be censored or repressed, and rather than being a disguise or a camouflage, seems to constitute an elementary form of consciousness of active assimilation . . ." (P191) ". . . the primacy of

assimilation explains . . . the "unconscious" symbol." (p 4)<sup>1</sup> This expansion opens the way to an understanding of the poetic symbol.

In the present volumes, complex symbols that are uninvolved in repression are called poetic symbols. Such personalized interpretations of new experiences which have never been available to consciousness, give rise to innovative ways of seeing the world and concepts for which there are no preexisting patterns of expression. Elements of awareness that pass through this portal to nonconscious zones require a search for a means of expression by the symbolizer using verbal, visual or musical content. Their cryptic quality is not the result of repression guided by a censorship, but is derived from the need of the symbolizer to shape new awarenesses and insights into representations (symbols) that can be used to fix ideas in memory and to convey ideas to others.

The concept of the non-regressed secondary symbol opens a theoretical niche in Piaget's theory for the poetic symbol (see below). There is no comparable place in Piaget's system for the transcendent symbol. Piaget's theory, steeped as it is in scientific monism, has no place for symbols whose content sources lie within the world of the spirit.

Two mechanisms of repression that activate portals into the system UCS for the concepts that subsequently may be expressed in consciousness (CS) through psychoanalytic symbolism, are recognized in Psychoanalytic symbol theory. One forces contents out of consciousness when they have acquired too much affect to be tolerated. In this first mechanism, Freud conceived of the manifest symbol as an external element that drew conscious attention (cathexis) away from the idea of the thing to be hidden (primal repression). If a conscious symbol were used to support the diversion of attention from and create latent content, the process was called by Freud "countercathexis". The second mechanism produces repression as the product of a force conceived of as being imposed by a censorship (repression proper). The repressed content, now latent, pushes to return to awareness and express itself through manifestations whose low valence for attracting affect makes it accessible to consciousness with the greatest level of comfort. The product of this process of selective return of the repressed is the psychoanalytic symbol. Either form of repression could give rise to a psychoanalytic symbol with an unconscious latent content. Piaget (1951) conceived of repression in the former sense. He stated "The origin of the unconscious symbol is to be found in the suppression of consciousness of the ego by complete absorption in, and

identification with, the external world . . ." (p 199). The manifest symbol is an example of such an element in the outside world. He challenged the concept of a universal role for a censorship in the creation of psychoanalytic symbols.

### **DISTINGUISHING FEATURES OF THE PSYCHOANALYTIC SYMBOL**

That which sets the psychoanalytic symbol apart from all other symbols are the communicative dynamic processes that drive its creation. The simple symbol is created out of conventions that assign relationships between words and ideas. Poetic symbols arise out of the poet's anguished search for the "right word". Poetic, simple, and transcendent symbols arise from an urge to clarify meaning through the use of the more communicative of two linked elements (concepts and words) and are motivated by the need to influence and communicate. Transcendent symbols emerge from religious traditions. The creation of a transcendent symbol involves intensification of affect. Its manifest forms are chosen on the basis of the ability of the representation to generate an intensified affect and harness the apotropaic thrust of awe to the creation of intense faith. The psychoanalytic symbol conversely is motivated by a need to hide meaning, to blur communication, and to diminish affect. Within any branch of a symbolic linkage, either of which could serve to express a concept, the path of expression in consciousness always makes its way toward the representation with less valence for attracting affect. It steers consciousness away from the more affect-laden representations.

### **APPROACHES CRITICAL TO THE CONCEPT OF PSYCHOANALYTIC SYMBOLS**

The complexities of Psychoanalytic symbol theory do not invite simple criticism. Leading symbol theorists such as Cassirer (1953, 1955), and Werner and Kaplan (1963) ignore Psychoanalytic symbols and the role of repression in symbol formation although their work provides rich source material for an understanding of the processes that produce such symbols. Typical of an active negative approach to the idea of unconscious meanings for symbols is the work of Hobson (1988) who equates psychoanalysts with "soothsayers" (p 9) and warns that it is ". . . as unhealthy as it is unscientific to indulge in symbol interpretation." (P 11) He claims that his ". . . position echoes Jung's notion of dreams as transparently meaningful (sic) and does away with any distinction between manifest and latent content." (P 12). In this regard, Jung's (1964) actual view of a repression free transparently meaningful relationship



between manifest and unconscious latent content in dream symbolism is worth our attention. He noted that, "Thus far, nobody can say anything against Freud's theory of repression and wish fulfillment as apparent causes of dream symbolism." (P27) "If somebody with little experience and knowledge of dreams thinks that dreams are just chaotic occurrences without meaning, he is at liberty to do so. But if one assumes that they are normal events, . . . one is bound to consider that they are either causal—i.e. that there is a rational cause for their existence—or in a certain way purposive or both." (P 32)

The idea that Jung considered the relationship between manifest and latent symbol content to be characterized by clarity is contradicted by Jung's statement "Because there are innumerable things beyond the range of human understanding, we constantly use symbolic terms to represent concepts that we cannot define or fully comprehend." (p21) "Man also produces symbols unconsciously and spontaneously in the form of dreams." (p 21) Jung's thoughts also find a place for Piaget's poetic secondary symbols. For instance, he notes that the images and ideas found in dreams cannot be explained only ". . . on the basis of memory, and that they contain concepts that have never been conscious". (See the present volume p 77.) (P 38)

### **FREUD, JUNG, JONES AND THE DEFINITION OF THE PSYCHOANALYTIC SYMBOL**

Both Freud and Jung emphasized in their study of symbols those to which they attributed universal meanings. Freud's emphasis did not neglect the psychoanalytic symbol as did Werner. However his use of the word "symbol" reduced psychoanalytic symbols to the status of only one of a group of compromise formations which are not necessarily called symbols and which are products of such ego structures as the dream work, ego functions that produce neurotic symptoms, fantasies, delusions, play, and wit. This de-emphasized Psychoanalytic symbols as they were described in his concept of secondary process thinking (1911). As a result there occurred in Freud's works a reduction of interest in the meaning of mental content accompanied by an increase in emphasis on the study and explanation of the structures of the mind. The eventual result of this vicissitude in the turnings of Psychoanalytic theory was the development of structural theory and of a psychology of the Ego.

Jones (1916) in his writings took up the banner of repression based symbolism. His approach called for describing any symbol associated with repression, a psychoanalytic symbol. In Jones' concept of Psychoanalytic symbols, the tendency for communication to be secondarily abrogated during symbol formation introduces a broad area of potential for mental dysfunction that need not be considered when working with simple symbols.

## *NOTES*

- 1 Assimilation refers to the process of putting the external world in the service of inner forces and memory elements. New experiences are interpreted through the influence of memories of past experience.