

# History, Heredity and 1916: A Jungian Perspective

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*"The serious problems in life, however, are never fully solved. If ever they should appear so it is a sure sign that something has been lost. The meaning and purpose of a problem seems not to lie in its solution but in our working at it incessantly..."*

(C.G. Jung CW8)

## Abstract

This article looks at Ireland's historical struggle for independence through the lens of Jung's concept of complexes, deepened here into the realm of cultural complexes, which, by their very nature, are at once both unique and collective. His idea that complexes contain both positive and negative poles (one identified with, the other projected), offers us the construct of the "necessary other" that spurs - or constrains - our development. The implications of identification with powerful cultural complexes are contrasted with the particular way something new may be born when the tension of opposites can be endured rather than collapsed into one or other of its poles.

## Introduction

Jung saw the tension generated by opposing entities as crucial for development; it acts similarly to the charge that runs between the positive and negative poles of a battery; should one pole collapse, no energy flows. Holding such tension builds up energy which then seeks a creative outlet. As a sort of internal motor, it brings us - with a cost

- to unforeseen places, wherein we may find ourselves wiser but sadder.

*"Whoever protects himself against what is new and strange... regresses to the past [and] falls into the same neurotic condition as the man who identifies himself with the new and runs away from the past. The only difference is that one has estranged himself from the past and the other from the future. **In principle both are doing the same thing:** they are reinforcing their narrow range of consciousness instead of shattering it in the tension of opposites and [thereby] building up a state of wider and higher consciousness."*

Jung, CW8, (emphasis mine).

This state of wider and higher consciousness arises, as we see, from the fragmentation of the previously-existing polarities which drives us forward from our previous position.

## What is a Complex?

It was Joseph Henderson, a founding member of the C.G. Jung Institute of San Francisco, who first described, in a 1947 letter to Jung, the concept of the cultural complex (Singer, 2004). Jung had long recognised the uniqueness of different cultures - indeed, his less-than-wisely-timed writings on the differences between "Jewish" and "German" psyches opened him to accusations of anti-Semitism that still echo down the years - and it follows that acknowledging the existence of

such differences in cultures must inevitably mean recognising their separate cultural complexes. His papers on the Word Association Test (experiments based on timed responses to lists of words), published between 1904 and 1909, gave birth to his theory of complexes. A hundred years of clinical experience has demonstrated that these are powerful forces in the lives of individuals and remain a cornerstone of analytical work, providing a structure for understanding the nature of intrapsychic and interpersonal conflict.

Put simply, a complex is a mainly-unconscious, emotionally-charged group of ideas and images drawn from personal (or cultural) history that cluster around an archetypal (or impersonal) core. Jung wrote:

*“The complex has a sort of body, a certain amount of its own physiology. It can upset the stomach. It upsets the breathing, it disturbs the heart-in short, it behaves like a partial personality. For instance, when you want to say or do something and unfortunately a complex interferes with this intention, then you say or do something different from what you intended. You are simply interrupted, and your best intention gets upset by the complex, exactly as if you had been interfered with by a human being or by circumstances from outside” (Jung CW8).*

One of the primary aims in Jungian work is to make complexes more accessible to consciousness, thus freeing up some of the trapped emotional energy for other psychological development in the service of individuation.

### Individuation

For Jung, the journey of individuation meant to realise as much of our potential as possible, and was, for him, the great task of life. He described four stages:

- 1) to separate from the mother and father complexes (in other words, to form our own judgements, being able to discriminate rather than unconsciously identify with family or cultural mores - with all that this struggle implies)
- 2) to form better relationships (to become more aware and more authentic)
- 3) to become more of who and what one is (take responsibility for our own development)
- 4) to make a connection to something greater or Other than ourselves (forge a link to the spiritual or transpersonal).

### Cultural Complex

Henderson defined the cultural unconscious as an area of historical memory that lies between the collective unconscious and the manifest pattern of the culture. (One of Jung’s unique contributions to psychology was his formulation of the concept of the collective unconscious, a deep layer, a motherlode even, common to all, from which one’s individual personal unconscious arises as flowers do from an underlying rhizome.) Henderson’s cultural unconscious resides at the collective level of a particular culture, and is expressed through the customs, art, architecture of that particular society.

The personal unconscious arises, like the Shannon from the Shannon Pot, from its source, the collective unconscious; it travels through the birth canal of the

cultural unconscious, scraping bloody influences from it as it passes, arriving, baggage in hand, as it were, to form the individual psyche. And that is the easy bit! What follows is turmoil as the struggle for consciousness begins.

### Ego

*“Of course to win for oneself a place in society and to transform one’s nature... is in all cases a considerable achievement. It is a fight waged within oneself as well as outside, comparable to the struggle of the child for an ego.” (Jung CW8).*

When challenges arise, it is easier to turn to denial or distraction rather than endure the tension long enough to allow what Jung termed “the self-regulating function of the psyche” to take over. This demands that a sufficiently-functioning ego, grounded in a sense of identity, be in place, otherwise there is danger of toppling or collapsing, of becoming unbalanced, one-sided.

When we disregard, ignore, or consign issues to the unconscious, pieces of ourselves and our collective humanity become atrophied. Both collectively and personally, this soul loss is a by-product of the tremendous capacity we have developed to disregard, a capacity that drains the life force of every living thing. For some, the complex (personal or cultural) is their identity; for more fortunate others, there develops a healthier identity (personal ego), separate from, but related to, the contaminating complexes. Tasked with relating, discriminating, enabling reflection, and the weighing-up of choices, the personal ego is the workhorse of the psyche. For the first group, the complex-identified, the complex

rules, and in a totalitarian frenzy, brooking no dissent, makes arbitrary decisions; for the second, the ego painfully makes and holds space for the consideration of alternative viewpoints before coming to a decision. Jung (CW8) described the characteristic patterns of an activated complex - repetitive, autonomous, resistant to becoming conscious, and driven to collect experiences that confirm its historical point of view.

As personal complexes can be said to emerge out of the level of the personal unconscious (in interaction with deeper levels of the psyche and with early parental/familial relationships), so cultural complexes can be thought of as arising out of the cultural unconscious (as it interacts with both the archetypal and personal levels as well as with the broader outer world of school, community, social and other media, and all other forms of cultural and group life).

Singer and Kimbles (2004) further develop the concept of large-scale social complexes which form in the layer of the cultural unconscious of groups and become cultural complexes, writing that

*“another level of complexes exists within the psyche of the group and within the individual at the group level of their psyche. We call these group complexes “cultural complexes,” and they, too, can be defined as emotionally charged aggregates of ideas and images that tend to cluster around an archetypal core and are shared by individuals within an identified collective...[While] personal complexes and cultural complexes are not the same, they do get mixed together and affect one another”.*



Cultural complexes are based on frequently-repeated historical experiences that have taken root in both the collective psyche of a group and in the psyches of the individual members of a group. They express archetypal values for the group, and as such tend to be unexamined and taken-on wholesale. So, cultural complexes can be thought of as the fundamental building blocks of a particular inner sociology - but one that is not objective or scientific in its perception of different groups and classes of people, a perception read or filtered through psychic lenses coloured by generations of ancestors. This received attitude (or the psychic atmosphere into which we are born) carries a powerful emotional charge, just as it also contains an abundance of information and misinformation about the structures of societies. Its essential components are cultural complexes.

When a group is emerging from long periods of oppression, it must define a new identity (a new ego) for itself in order to move on from an

oppressed or victim mentality. Long-submerged traditions are frequently mined in order to construct such an identity. (*“IRISHMEN AND IRISHWOMEN: In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom.”*)

This struggle can, and frequently does, get entangled in different underlying powerful cultural complexes that have stored up historical experience and memory over centuries of trauma. (*“In every generation the Irish people have asserted their right to national freedom and sovereignty; six times during the last three hundred years they have asserted it to arms. Standing on that fundamental right and again asserting it in arms in the face of the world, we hereby proclaim the Irish Republic as a Sovereign Independent State, and we pledge our lives and the lives of our comrades-in-arms to the cause of its freedom, of its welfare, and of its exaltation among the nations.”*)

Fresh trauma may energeise sleeping monsters, awakening them, freeing them to rampage. Jung, presciently, said that we do not have complexes, but that our complexes have us; the splinter personality takes over the whole. The resulting identification with the emotionally-charged complex inevitably means that our vision is narrowed, our personality reduced, the vital space for reflection lost; we become mere agents of the colonising complex.

*“The Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman. The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue*



*the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and all of its parts, cherishing all of the children of the nation equally and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past”).*

Singer (2006) suggests the psychology of cultural complexes operates both in the collective psychology of the group as well as in the individual members of the group. He observes that individuals and groups in the grips of a particular cultural complex automatically take on shared body language and postures, or express their distress in similar somatic complaints. Historical examples of such possession by group/cultural complexes abound; the “witches” of Salem, Massachusetts (1692), where vulnerable individuals, exhibiting similar behaviours, were deemed to be possessed by demons brought by other members of the community, who were consequently tortured and executed - the basis for Arthur Miller’s play, “The Crucible. Similar tales of possession, debauchery, group coherence, torture and execution, in the small French town of Loudon in 1633, are written up in Aldous Huxley’s non-fiction novel, “The Devils of Loudon”; and, perhaps closer to home, the epidemic of late 19th century/early 20th century hysteria described by Charcot and Freud, which we now conceive of as a corollary of the cultural and sexual repression of women in the Victorian era.

Such an unconscious and autonomous nature lends the complex the ability to spread like wildfire and to infect vulnerable subjects, demonstrating what Jung had also pointed out - the bipolar nature of a complex, positive and

negative, so that when activated, the ego (group ego or individual ego of a group member) becomes identified with one part of the unconscious complex while the other pole is projected out onto a suitable hook (another group, or one of its members). Intense collective emotion is the hallmark of an activated cultural complex. Students of 20th century history will also recognise in this the pattern of the McCarthy Communist “witch hunts” of the 1950s.

Conscious efforts to broaden the grounding of an Irish identity were made by Douglas Hyde - who strove to base the foundation of Irishness on more than mere opposition to England and Englishness; WB Yeats dreamed of “enlarging Irish hatred” so that Ireland would be more than not-England, would start from somewhere other than a negation, would construct an identity born of its roots and ideals.

### **The Irish Split**

The psychic division engendered by the existence of two competing languages, evident in the post Famine years, caught many native Irish in the bind of needing to abandon Irish, while not yet having mastered English. Even the Emancipator himself, Daniel O’Connell, considered Irish a barrier to progress, holding his meetings everywhere in English –

*“I could witness without a sigh the gradual disuse of Irish ... I am sufficiently utilitarian not to regret its abandonment” (Berresford Ellis).*

Thus, Declan Kiberd suggests, Irish writers wrote “with one eye cocked on the English audience ... painfully imitative of English literary modes... practised with the kind of excess possible only to the insecure”. He goes on to say that, while most nation-states have

existed before they were defined and were thus defined by their very existence, those states such as Ireland, attempting to emerge from occupation, dispossession, or denial, have a very different form of growth.

*“Most dispossessed peoples fought a different fight. Under occupation, they could never be their distinctive selves but had to seem so by an adopted attitude, an assumed style. This they would later proceed to justify by a recovered or discovered content” (Kiberd, 1995).*

In *The Broken Harp: Identity and Language in Modern Ireland*, biologist Tomás Mac Síomóin presents the decline of Irish as one of the most insidious outcomes of multi-faceted colonisation from the 16th century through to the present day. He describes the residual effects of post-colonial trauma perpetuated not only through intergenerational imitation of behavioural patterns, but also in the hereditary transmission of the colonial condition via DNA structures and epigenetic profiles. He sees three distinct agents of colonisation - initiated by the Tudors, perpetuated by the Irish Catholic Church’s movement into the power vacuum left at the end of the Irish War of Independence, and subsequently consolidated in the imposition of the English-inspired status quo.

In the particular psychological profile of the Irish - as a people who for generations suffered genocide, famine, and sexual crime as consequences of the first two waves of colonisation - he notes a catastrophic vulnerability to the third and present wave of colonisation, that of Anglocentric neo-liberal globalisation, of which our tendency towards, and toleration of, alcoholism is symptomatic.

Suggesting that Ireland has a general infatuation with, and assimilation to, the cultural norms of other Anglophone cultures (closer to Boston than Berlin, perhaps?), he proposes that adopting the language of the coloniser exposes the colonised subject to a world-view in which he is a mere junior partner, a Johnny-come-lately. Consequently, colonised peoples appear perversely willing to internalise unflattering colonial conceptions of themselves - to introject the cultural complexes of the coloniser, with all their concomitant negative associations, vis-à-vis, the colonised. He compares the peculiarly Irish “disjunctive dialogue”, aka “the gift of the gab”, with the fragmented testimony of traumatised survivors of the 2001 AirTransat crash, whose excessive attention in reporting minute details while lacking a cohesive narrative is typical of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Although many of the traumatic episodes of Ireland’s past occurred generations ago, MacSíomóin contends that the past is not really past since there is an ever-present hereditary factor in susceptibility to PTSD. Thus, since the majority of Irish people have lived in conditions favouring PTSD for many centuries, and indeed, may still do in Northern Ireland, the entire populace of Ireland are heirs to what he terms, ‘Super Colonised Irish Syndrome,’ demonstrated by an inability to be internationally assertive, comparing our apathetic surrender to European Union austerity with the ferocious opposition of Greece, a nation possessing an unbroken intellectual heritage unscathed by cultural colonisation.

### Literature

The drama in Brian Friel’s play, “Translations”, set in 19th century

Donegal, arises out of the political and cultural struggle between England and Ireland. Focussing on (mis)communication as the engine of the turbulent and desperate situation between the two countries, Friel uses language as a device to highlight the problems of communication — lingual, cultural, and generational. Both Irish and English characters in the play “speak” their respective languages, but in actuality it is English that is mostly spoken by the actors. This allows the audience to understand all the languages, as if a translator was provided. However, onstage, the characters cannot comprehend each other. Neither is willing to compromise and learn the other’s language, a metaphor for the wider barrier between them; tragedy ensues, and the play ends ambiguously.

It is sobering to recall that the 1916 war of independence was swiftly followed by civil war, an outward expression, perhaps, of successive internal psychic wars?

In conclusion, the lesson Jung tries to impart is that eliminating the Other, the opposite pole, does not lead to development, but rather to stagnation and rigidity. Just five years after being released from nearly three decades in prison, Nelson Mandela’s espousal of the (previously-hated) Springboks as “One team, one country”, proved to be an inspired move that united South Africa for the very first time. The ability to endure such terrible tension offers a chance for a more creative outcome. Wars on terror, on “Axes of Evil”, jihads - all strive to eliminate and remove the Other from consciousness. Jung’s challenge to us is to find new ways of relating, to continue to “[work] at it incessantly”. 

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