

## Review of The Fountain Film: A Hero's Journey as the Road to Rebirth

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Artículo

**Introduction.** The Fountain (2006) (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0414993/>) is a film directed by Darren Aronofsky, in which there are three narratives in different contexts and scenarios but with particular elements that connect the three stories. The film starts with Tomas, a 16<sup>th</sup>-century conquistador who serves the Spanish Queen Isabella and who has taken the mission of finding the Tree of Life. In the second narrative, Tommy Creo is a scientist who works to find the cure for cancer to save his dying wife Izzi. A sample of a tree from Guatemala is his hope of salvation. The third story is within a bubble where Tommy travels towards a dying star, Xibalba; he seeks eternity in the longing for his lover. The purpose of this brief introduction is to offer the context of the film's narratives that will be discussed in this paper from the perspective of the hero's journey, the rebirth's archetype, and the Self.

The Fountain film embraces archetypal elements that link the human psyche with a greater nature. For instance, the longing land of rebirth, the experience of death as the road to awe, and the archetypal image of the Tree of Life as the Self. It is precisely what a film reveals and captivates in the soul of the spectator, as Jung (1971) said, "The impact of an archetype, whether it takes the form of immediate experience or is expressed through the spoken word, stirs us because it summons up a voice that is stronger than our own" (p. 82). The Fountain activates primordial elements that give a sense of familiarity in the personal world.

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**First Narrative.** The film starts with the conquistador called to find the coordinates of immortality in a Mayan territory. His journey is encouraged by the promise of being with the queen forever. His task is to go through the sword that has been placed in the sacred pyramid to protect the tree of life and find the Garden of Eden. "Let us finish it!... we are her salvation and through her command, we shall live forever" These are the initial words of the conquistador that recall his mission and his conquest. In this scenario the hero has accepted his task, he does not know the route of the path, but he does know the treasure: being with his lover forever.

In this sense, Vogler (2007) mentioned, "The seeds of change and growth are planted, and it takes only a little new energy to germinate them" (p. 99). The hero is called to the adventure. He has accepted the task because it has been given by the queen, his anima and guide, who opened the mysterious door of the unconscious. Von Franz (1964) explained that the role of the anima is vital in the development of a man, since she puts "a man's mind in tune with the right inner values and thereby opening the way into more profound inner depths" (p. 193).

In the preparation for the unknown the conquistador meets his mentor, Father Avila, who guards a map with the secret that promises to free all mankind from tyranny. The mentor gives the tools for finding the holy pyramid, the birthplace of life in which the tree of life resides. In this sense Vogler (2007) explained, "Meeting with the Mentor is the stage of the Hero's Journey in which the hero gains the supplies, knowledge, and confidence needed to overcome fear and commence the adventure" (p. 117).

In his journey, the hero approaches the unknown. He has to find the hidden pyramid in the dark night. But before, he must go through the threshold where the guardians block the way to protect the flaming sword that at the same time guards the Tree of Life. The hero is called to face the shadow. He, as Henderson (1964) explained, "must realize that the shadow exists and that he can draw strength from it. He must come to terms with its destructive powers if he is to become sufficiently terrible to overcome the dragon" (p. 112). The film contains in this narrative two significant elements present in the hero's journey. The first one has to do with the enemy represented by the guardians of the holy pyramid who symbolically reflect the rejected unconscious aspects placed in the shadow and the second one, is the Mayan priest who protects the Tree of Life and climbs the holy pyramid to be encountered by the conquistador.

In this ascension there is a transformation. The dark night becomes a sunrise implying the movement from moon to sun, from the unconscious to consciousness. Jung (1968) said: "The sun is the image of God, the heart is the sun's image in man, just as gold is the sun's image in the earth . . . and God is known in the gold" (343).

The hero crosses the threshold to meet with the Mayan guardian, who represents the rebirth's archetype and who welcomes the hero saying: "Death is the road to awe." From this perspective, Jung (1980) explained: "in addition to the technical processes of transformation there are also natural transformations. All ideas of rebirth are founded on this fact. Nature herself demands a death and a rebirth" (p. 130).

At this moment of the story, which is called by Joseph Campbell "the Ordeal," the hero stands in front of the greatest challenge; he faces the guardian of the Tree of Life. "First Father sacrificed himself for the tree of life. Enter and join his fate." This is the invitation to the sacrifice that must occur if the conquistador wants to find the treasure. The hero is called to die in order to be reborn and transformed. In this scene

the conquistador is wounded with the sword that protects the tree of Life. The sacrificial rite opens the leading path towards the fountain of life where the hero extracts the sap that gives him eternal life. Such as Vogler (2007) said, "The hero is now fully part of the cosmos, dead to the old, limited vision of things and reborn into a new consciousness of connections" (p. 171). This is the moment where the ego gives space to the other, which is painful and feels as a death. When the conquistador Tomas places the sap of the Tree of Life in his wound he observes immediately its healing function. When he drinks this rejuvenating fluid the whole body becomes the soil for new flowers to grow. This scene represents the resurrection in another form of life; the body has been given back to the primordial substance and the hero has been reborn and transformed. Von Franz (1974) outlined the notion of the tree and its symbolic meaning saying that it "provides an analogy to human life, that the tree carries life, like the lights on the Christmas tree, and that the sun rising at the top of the tree implies growth toward higher consciousness" (p. 43).

**Second Narrative.** The second narrative of the film takes place in a present time, where the oncologist researcher Tommy Creo works to find the cure to save his dying wife. In this story the hero seems as if he were disconnected from the call of his anima. "Take a walk with me... It is the first snow..." This is the invitation from his dying wife Izzi. She knows that there is no time; she can feel that it is the last snow she will see. Tommy struggles with his own suffering. He is obsessed with finding the cure to the disease of dying. For him, death is an illness that must be treated and stopped. The response to his anima's invitation is "I am sorry... I will see you tonight." He does not follow her voice; he refuses to accept the mission because he is busy trying to find the eternal life. But he knows that the night is where she might appear through his dreams.

The refusal, according to Vogler (2007), "can be an opportunity to redirect the focus of the adventure. An adventure taken on a lark or to escape some unpleasant consequence may be nudged into a deeper adventure of the spirit" (p.113). Tommy is not aware of his wife's needs. He thinks that the need of finding the cure is hers too, but when she tells him "I feel different inside... It is time for you to read it" she knows her body will die soon, she accepts this reality but her need is to give Tommy the task of finishing her book. Probably her unconscious, through the body and the imaginal story written in her book, gave her a hint that she was about to die and to live eternally. Jung (1980) said: "The intuition of immortality which makes itself felt during the transformation is connected with the peculiar nature of the unconscious" (p. 142). Tommy and Izzi are in different paths, while she is in the transition of leaving her body to go to what she thinks is the place of rebirth: Xibalba, the dying star where the souls go to be reborn, Tommy is trying to fix and control what is immanent: the death.

In this process he is lost. He does not listen to the voice of the unconscious because the ego leads him to the goal of his work. Jung (1980) explained how the attitude

towards that voice or invitation of the unconscious interferes in the individuation: "Our attitude towards this inner voice alternates between two extremes: it is regarded either as undiluted nonsense or as the voice of God" (p. 132).

"What are you doing here?" This is the question that Tommy asks Izzi when she comes to invite him to take a walk. He does not expect to see her at work, which psychologically is the irruption of the unconscious in the ego and persona world. At this stage, the ego is busy in his illusion of being omnipresent and eternal. In the refusal moment Tommy does not accept that Izzi has showed up at his work; the unconscious invitation seems strange to the ego because it cannot make room to the 'other' in his own house. Jung (1980) pointed this out: "we cannot get accustomed to the idea that we are not absolute master in our own house" (p.131).

However, her death forces him to develop a new attitude towards life, death, and human nature. An external event in the life of Tommy has activated his psychic energy to an inner movement and development; Vogler (2007) explained that typically the commitment of heroes "is brought about through some external force which changes the course or intensity of the story" (p. 128).

At the beginning of the story Tommy had lost his wedding ring but when Izzi dies, he engraves his wedding band in his finger with the same ink that his wife has given to him for finishing the chapter of her book. The ring as a symbol of wholeness has vanished but it returns in the form of a tattoo made with the instruments to culminate the task. He marks his skin with the fountain pen to recall the eternal union with his lover. This scene is the turning point in this second narrative because Tommy's frustration, sadness, and longing bridge the emerging aspect. In this sense, outer events might open the door to personal unconscious contents. According to Conforti (2005) "At such moments, at such breaking points, one either goes deeper into the previous field, or breaks free. In the leave-taking of the field, a tremendous amount of self-reflection is necessary prior to the emergence into a new field" (p. 61).

**Third Narrative.** The third story in the film takes place in a bubble where Tommy and a living tree are ascending to Xibalba. This narrative offers a window into consciousness, death, and rebirth. In this stage, he has embarked himself on a journey. A bubble is his carrier. Symbolically, a bubble might be similar to an egg, which in this case embraces life as a continuum energy and death as the door to the eternal life. The symbol of the egg means, as von Franz (1974) explained, "a new germ, a new life possibility. . . . A true goal for inner development" (pp. 265-266).

"Finish it! You know how to do it" Izzi burst into Tommy's bubble. She is his hallucination and his longing. Although he does not want her there, he is looking for her. His own darkness is felt when the tree is dying and he cannot have more of its healing substance. At this point, the hero as Slater (2005) would mention, "... becomes,

as we do in dreams, the subject of overwhelming forces and experiences a psychic dissolution into these forces" (p. 16).

"I am afraid" Here is precisely when Tommy recognizes his emotions and vulnerabilities, he has refused the call to adventure one more time because he is afraid; he does not know how to finish his wife's book, but Izzi as the anima and the mentor, gives him the confidence to accept the task. As well as the queen, Izzi incarnates the treasure: "together we will live forever."

When Tommy accepts to finish the twelve chapter of her book, he is accepting death; that condition of being mortal and the seed to endless life. The boundaries of the ego are transcended and a new development is emerging from the Self. The illusion of living forever ends and the tree dies, but the hero is reborn. He leaves the egg levitating in lotus position, representing the immortality of the Self and the connection with a higher spirit. Jung (1980) said, "Sitting in the lotus-seat, the yogi sees himself transfigured into an immortal" (p. 130). The symbolic representation of this image is important because the Self has gone through the ego's boundaries. At this point he encounters wholeness in accepting the invitation of the unconscious and in coming to terms with the opposite. Von Franz (1974) explained, "Giving birth out of itself without addition, it symbolizes the innermost nucleus of the individual, the Self, to which we cannot add or take away" (p. 265).

Only by accepting the call to adventure from the unconscious might there be a transformation. It is not easy because the ego suffers a defeat by realizing that there is something greater than itself, which is felt as a death.

Tommy leaves the bubble to be part of the universe; he is capable of unifying his Self with a higher element without dualities between life and death, matter and psyche. This connection with the Self is felt as an illuminating state. Campbell (1974) said: "And when such a realization of the nonduality of heaven and earth -even of nonbeing and being- will have been attained and assimilated, life-joy will pour from all things, as from an inexhaustible cup" (p. 198).

## Conclusion

The Fountain film offers a window into the hero's journey, the archetype of rebirth and the Self. I have not focused this paper on the meaning of some elements that have been laced exclusively to Christianity. Rather, I have reviewed this film from a depth psychology perspective, considering the Tree of Life, the sacrifice, and resurrection as archetypal expressions represented psychically. The film develops the story of the hero's journey in three narratives, in which the principles of death/rebirth, nature, and longing give structure to the psychic tendency of seeking wholeness.

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