

An analysis of Peer Gynt

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Neuroendocrinology Letters 1999; **20**:195–197

pii: NEL203499X03

The secret of Peer Gynt lies in the relationship to his mother. When the drama begins, Åse is in her early forties and mother of the young, boasting, freeloader, who lives in his fantasies. She is the first woman in Peer Gynt's life and affects all who follow by comparison. "Behind him stands a woman..."—therefore he cannot be defeated by either the Boyg or the troll. Yet Peer Gynt also says, "The Devil takes all women." And that is the conflict that drives him "out," creating the secret angst which carries him around the world "and beyond." It forces him into many roles: prince, slave trader, prophet, gold digger.... Constantly running away—from whom? And continually seeking whom?

When the poem begins, Peer Gynt is like a child, playing and lying with his mother despite the fact that he is 20 years old, and Åse is "short and slight." In the final scene a "great, old man with a white beard" buries his face in Solveig's lap while she sings a lullaby, as if to a child. It has come full circle from the Mother Woman to the Woman Mother, from Åse to Solveig, and both call Peer Gynt, "my lad."

When he meets Solveig, she has just been to see "the priest" and is probably 15 years old. Ibsen said the story spans 50 years, implying that Peer Gynt is about 70 years old in the final scene, and Solveig some 5 years younger—"upright and gentle."

Yet the passing of the years in the drama does not mean much—Peer Gynt is always "the lad" with "women behind him."

On his first journey into the dreamland of life, Åse takes him to Soria-Moria, a fairyland. The dream symbols vary: from the hut Peer Gynt built Solveig (and then fled); to the royal hall of the Old Man of Dovre (where he cries out to his mother for help); to Anitra, a fleeting desert mirage. The years pass and the adventure shifts from real life, to a dream, and back again. Yet in reality, "the lad sits on his mother's lap, both have laid there all the lifelong day. The lad remains at his mother's bosom all the lifelong day."

In the early 1920s, I saw Renée Björling's Solveig at the City Theater in Malmö. In the final scene, I saw how the figures Åse and Solveig united into one woman who calls Peer Gynt "dearest son of mine."

Peer Gynt also reflects this duality in his final words in the last scene: "My mother—my wife! Oh, purest of women—hide me, oh hide me, within your love," while he "clings to her tightly, burying his face in her lap."

Quite understandably, Peer Gynt has been compared to another timeless figure, Goethe's Faust, who is saved by the "eternally female"—"virgin pure and mother fair, queen and goddess."

Peer Gynt is often seen as a good-for-nothing, an incompetent who wasted and failed in his own life—a troll. But in reality he is Everyman, representing the childlike human—a man. It would be wrong to view him as a product of his time, since he belongs to all ages, and all men. “One always feels an affinity to Peer Gynt.” Nor did Ibsen write a poem with a societal message, even if he found inspiration in the political and social life of his day—“Why cannot my book be read as a poem? For that is how I wrote it?”

Peer Gynt suffers from the delusions of any man: he must be big and strong, emperor and conqueror. He believes in the “Gyntian self” and travels by land and sea to inflate his ego, constantly making new plans “to realize the Gyntian Empire. Yet he will always be the lad” for the two women who truly know and love him. It is not until he is *forced* to give up his role as the great man, the advocate of the Gynt ego, that he realizes what Åse and Solveig always knew and felt; when he cries out: “Hide me, hide me. Within your love,” and buries his face in Solveig’s lap and finds true peace.

Yet the poem is about how a man can be “outside” of himself an entire lifetime. His personality, as it has been formed in his childhood, and which he sees as the core of his masculinity, has not been easy to recognize and dismantle. “I shall be king, emperor! Yes, I shall! I only need time!” But when he begins to become aware of this lie of his life, he tells himself: “You are not an emperor, you are an onion. Now I will peel you, my dear Peer.” While peeling the onion, he understands that he, just as the onion, is lacking a core. The Gyntian ego is an illusion. Yet this man clings to his personality at all costs, as if it were carrying the seeds to his virility.

Persona means mask and, just as Peer Gynt replaces one mask with the next, the man also lives out his role as the ruler “of wants, lusts and desires...whims, claims and demands.”

It is not until he is overwhelmed by his angst that Peer Gynt can break down and give up his attitude about masculine strength. He is alone and unable to find the child within. Neither Åse nor Solveig exists in his consciousness. He sees himself as no-one, nothing. Who is not shaken by his plea for mercy:

*“So unspeakably poor can the soul return
through the sombre mists into nothingness,
Do not be angry, oh lovely earth,
if, to no purpose, I trampled your grass.
Oh lovely sun, your growing rays
have squandered themselves on an empty house...”*

Before this, the Button Moulder explains to him that: “Being one’s self is slaying one’s Self.” And man must observe “the Master’s intention”— even Peer. He does not know that his travels and wanderings have not only been to flee angst, but also the figure of woman: His mother and his love. And also to flee the figment of his imagination, the Woman in Green, the negative image of woman, mother of a monstrosity—a troll.

Peer Gynt feels (as any conscious man would feel) Fear of Woman—the fear that is reverence.

She represents birth, but also death. After he cries out to Åse in the Hall of Dovre,

Peer fights the Boyg:

*“Backwards and forwards it’s just as far,
out or in, it’s just as narrow.”*

When the Boyg disappears, Solveig is waiting, but she is frightened by Peer who holds her sister Helga with the words: “Ask her not to gorge me!” Fear of Woman as the impenetrable mystery, his impulse to flee her, and yet not be able to be without her, dominates Peer’s feelings: angst forces him “out.”

Peace and understanding come to him late—yet not too late—when he, like a child—buries his face in Solveig’s lap—as the “sun rises.” Then Åse and Solveig unite into one and the man’s fear has been refined into reverence. Great authors and artists often sense that which scientific investigation confirms much, much later. Did Ibsen sense, when he created Åse and Solveig as the primary roles, as figures of women who see the man as a child, that one day scientific evidence would prove that such sensed perceptions were true? Our own myth of creation—whether we have the faith or not—always states that the man was created first, and then came the woman. Modern researchers of biology and anthropology have now found that nature’s first intention or tendency in the creation of the differences between the sexes is to develop the female creature first. Woman is the primary being with a direct development. A certain hormonal influence must be affected during a particular period in the development of the fetus if the masculine creature is to appear. Therefore biologically, the man is a secondary product of that development. He has been able to create and dominate his Empire, Gyntiania, only thanks to his physical strength. But the psychic power remains with the primary creation, Woman.

Peer Gynt asks: “Where was I? Myself—complete and whole? Solveig: “...you are mother yourself to the lad who is there. Hide me, oh hide me, within your love.” The emperor has absconded and found his rightful place. Woman, the primary creature, mother, wife—“singing more loudly in the sunshine.”

*“I will cradle you, I will guard you;
sleep and dream, dearest son of mine.”*