

*Section: Special articles***R. WAGNER'S DER RING DES NIBELUNGEN THROUGH THE PHILOSOPHICAL PRISM OF POSITIVE PSYCHOTHERAPY****Maria V. Sergeeva**

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Abstract

Using metaphors as an instrument of positive psychotherapy in some way reiterates the idea of the myths in Lévi-Strauss' structuralism that natural phenomena are how myths seek to explain realities belonging to a logical order. Similarly, in their abstraction, metaphors strive to represent realities 'clothed' in words and cultural specifics. At the very same time, positive psychotherapy itself provides instruments for the analysis of these realities.

The present study aims to provide a psychological view of R. Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* through the lenses of positive psychotherapy. Due to the complexity of the work, the research focuses on two main leitmotifs of *The Ring*: cyclicity of life and love vs. power.

Generally, the results indicate that the prism of positive psychotherapy allows one to find the deeper meaning hidden in work, revealing psychological motives of 'why.' Hence, it seems possible not only to use metaphors as an instrument of psychotherapy but also to broaden the use of positive psychotherapy as a 'thinking cell' in understanding life and culture.

Keywords: Positive Psychotherapy, Wagner, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, love

Introduction

R. Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelung* – hereafter, *The Ring*), by this day, is still considered to be one of the greatest pieces of art in human history. Its complexity incorporates political, philosophical, and historical evolution and transformation that stay forever acute. Hence, *The Ring* and the ideas within were subject to research from many different perspectives, trying to comprehend the meaning of the work from the point of musicology (Timmermans, 2015), literature (Haymes, 2009), art in general (Revard, 2003), political stances (Allen, 2013), philosophical (Gutman, 1968), cultural and mythological views (Cusack, 2013), etc. While some common notions related to the work can be drawn from

the research – as it is seen, for example, with Wagner's association to Feuerbach or the leitmotiv of the love-power battle – the understanding of the meaning is, on the one hand, subjective; and, on the other hand, to some extent predominated. In one of his letters to August Röckel, Wagner states – concerning the gods' downfall at the end of the *Ring* cycle: "The necessity for this downfall had to arise out of our own deepest convictions... Thus, it was all-important to justify this catastrophe to the spectator's feelings; it is so justified to anyone who follows the course of the whole action with all its simple and natural motives" (Letters, 1897).

This paper does not aim to reevaluate the philosophical findings of previous researchers or rethink the symbolism or political issues within

but rather to give input on how and why these 'convictions' arise from the perspective of positive psychotherapy, expanding the psychological understanding behind Wagner's *The Ring*. Given the complexity of the work, this article focuses on only the main concepts.

Methodology

Given the subjectivity of the interpretation of art, the main method instrumental to the research is introspection (Yanovsky, 2015), as the further discussion in an individual interpretation of *The Ring*'s impression of the author is structured through the prism of positive psychotherapy. Considering methods of scientific research, the following methods are used: observation, comparison, as well as the method of ascending from the abstract to the concrete (in the analytical and synthetic approach of S.L. Rubinstein) (Chesnakova, 2021), formalization (as the interpretation is given through the lens of positive psychotherapy language). The research is largely based on the ideas of the method of positive psychotherapy (hereafter – PPT). Accordingly, the terms and concepts used in the paper should be considered through the paradigm of N. Peseschkian.

Discussion

R. Wagner's *The Ring* brings forward many relevant issues due to their reflection of conflicts in different planes of human existence. These conflicts may be distinguished not only via the field criterion (politics, sociological conflicts, philosophy, etc.) but also vary greatly in inter-field differentiation. From the psychological perspective, a variety of conflicts can generally be described in PPT's four model dimensions. Thus, the understanding of the relationship between the characters alongside the given comprehension of the character's interpretation of the said relations towards themselves ("I-dimension") is represented, for example, in a dialogue of Siegfried and Mime (Act 1, opera *Siegfried*), or the scenes of Brünnhilde and Wotan (opera *Die Walküre*), etc. The "You-dimension" as the relationship of primary caretakers between themselves that also contributes to the formation of basic concepts of the individual can be noted in Siegmund's aspiration for love that he had felt and observed in his childhood (opera *Die Walküre*). "We-

dimension" is the attitude towards the social environment initially determined by the relationship of one's parents with their social environment, and "Primary-We dimension" as the individual's worldview and direct attitude to social, religious, ideological norms and values – are recognizable in Hagen's disregard of love (opera *Götterdämmerung*) or Siegmund's contempt of the gods (opera *Die Walküre*). There are many other examples that, of course, reflect the basic concepts of the characters that, in turn, merge into a single complex mechanism of the Cycle, moving the plot forward. With such a complex task, it seems nearly impossible to conceptualize all of them at once (though it sounds very interesting to reveal the psychological 'skeleton' of *The Ring*); hence, in this article, we will focus on several main ideas that are at the heart of the plot and became the cause of the story itself.

3.2. Cyclicity of life

In positive psychotherapy, there are three interaction stages that reflect how the relationship changes with time. In the first stage – attachment (or fusion) – the individuals consider each other to be alike, with similar thoughts, feelings, and ideas; usually, the subjects are the main sources of love, contact, pleasure, or any other unfilled need for each other. The second stage – differentiation – comes with an understanding of our differences, more often than not leading to conflicts arising when basic concepts of the individuals are found to be not the same and, consequently, stop working. According to N. Peseschkian, "It is only by identifying differences that we learn to find the right nexus between satisfying our needs and the demands of the world around us" (Peseschkian, 2002). At this stage, it is important to distinguish between yourself and your partner (or others). The next stage of interaction – separation – implies that two individuals no longer depend only on each other to satisfy their needs; they have a variety of ways to choose from. Their behavior is determined by their ideas, wishes, and choices. Each individual has his autonomy that allows him to take responsibility for himself, his actions, and his life. Regarding a relationship, this stage can be described as "I do not need to be with you, but I choose/want to be with you." With this new autonomy and a new understanding of each other (a kind of new 'order' of the relationship),

a new loop of the cycle comes with the new attachment stage. This cycle is never-ending, going spiral with the increasing complexity of ourselves and our relationship.

The Ring covers a fairly long period, covering the creation and death of the gods' civilization. It starts with Wotan (king of the gods) breaking off the most sacred branch from the World-Ash Tree (Yggdrasil), causing the latter to wither to make a spear inscribing Wotan's holy laws and treaties to rule the world. This moment – signifying Wotan's ascending to rule – is the start of the new cycle of relations between Wotan himself and the Universe. In some way, this act can be regarded as an act of separation against the Universe that is, at its beginning, doomed to fail, as the order of the Universe is far greater than that of Wotan.

So, rejecting the natural laws of the Universe, the self-proclaimed king of gods tries to establish his own laws, transforming the chaos he does not understand and cannot control into an understandable, well-ordered system. Hence, the relationship between the Universe and Wotan changed alongside the rising of the New Order. This New Order is a result of the individual seeking to define the chaos of uncertainty by setting his boundaries, establishing at the end the new interaction model that, through the prism of stages of interaction, can be seen as a new fusion (or attachment) phase.

Eros and Thanatos drive the human nature represented in Wotan, so the more Wotan tries to distinguish himself from the chaos of the Universe (the life drive), the more the gap between the laws of the Universe and the things Wotan himself can control, causing him to discredit his rule. A vivid example is the Ring and, even before that, the Rhinegold.

In the Rhine River live the Rhine's daughters-mermaids – whose father (the river itself) gave them the gold for guarding. With mermaids' playful nature – that some researchers identify with women being a symbol of fertile beckoning land (Perkins, 2018), the theft of the gold is just a question of time. Alberich–Nibelung (the dwarf) comes to the shores of the Rhine to try and find love. Being rejected and taunted by the mermaids, he feels increasingly worthless, bringing forward his anger and willingness to prove his worth by conquering others. The Mermaids themselves give him the key: in their singing, they reveal that to master the gold, one should relinquish love. And that is exactly what

Alberich does, and from this gold, he creates the Ring aimed at subjugating others.

The gold, the rule for its mastery, or the ring with its power turned out to be beyond the Wotan's dominion. The problem arises due to Wotan's wish to continue his rule, trying to conquer those who oppose him. Until the Ring, it was possible, but the Ring itself is a potential risk for his rule. Trying to keep the ring for himself, Wotan, consequently, starts to discredit himself and his laws (for example, by circumventing his oath in the opera *Das Rheingold*).

This ambivalence somewhat reflects M. Mamardashvili's ideas concerning humans' ability to doubt. "Our willingness to doubt the irrefutability of alleged facts or evidence of experience is always hindered by the following circumstance that I would call the law of mental self-preservation. We are afraid to go to the end in doubt, where we need to part with ourselves because this can destroy our idea of ourselves and our identity.... We are ready to doubt, but... we cannot allow the destruction of the fusion of our mental life, the loss of ourselves with our qualities. And that's what it means to love your soul. And therefore... to lose her. Because people would rather do everything possible for their destruction and the death of all decent than give up on themselves" (Mamardashvili, 2019).

With Wotan's rule not being absolute and with more and more circumstances out of control, the only way to accept the situation is through the belief that represents the establishment of a new relationship with the Universe. This idea is proven by Wagner himself, as in one of his letters to August Röckel, he states that "Man, acting in conformity with his organization, has recourse to endless expedients in order to grasp the Universe as a whole: these expedients in all their endless complexity are simply a group of concepts; and in our pride at having this attained to a concept of the world in its entirety, we lose sight of our true position, forgetting that after all we have grasped nothing but the concept, and that consequently we are simply taking pleasure in the instrument of our own making, while all the time we remain further removed than ever from the reality of the world. But the man who can find no lasting delight in the phantasms of this illusion, at last, becomes conscious that his mind rebels against its tyranny. He recognizes the unreality of this barren illusion and feels impelled to turn to reality and to approach it using feeling" (Letters,

1897). Hence, in this case, separation takes the form of a return to the beginning, the destruction of the existing structure, and the illusions of one's power.

In the end, the destruction and the start of a new cycle are inevitable. Hence, at the end of the cycle of the Ring (opera *Götterdämmerung*), the Ring returns to the Rhine, waiting for the next spiral of the new cycle.

3.3. Love VS Power

The motive of love opposing the human ambition for power is very prominent in the psychological literature (for example, Vasilyeva, 2006). While many works have been done to understand the nature of power (Firstov, 2005; Petrova, 2015), there is no integral concept for that in positive psychotherapy, as human striving for power is unique in every case (determined by different needs).

However, love in positive psychotherapy is one of the basic capacities of a human (alongside the capacity to know), the one he was born with. Capacity to love stems from the bond established with primary caregivers and, after further differentiation, determines the basis of so-called primary capacities (love, ideal/modeling, patience, time, contact, sexuality, trust, confidence, hope, faith, doubt, certitude, unity). The capacity to know can be described as the need to know the relationship within reality, which enables people to question why everything is as it is and how the world around them functions (Maden et al., 2023). Gaining experience leads to further development of the capacity, causing it to differentiate into secondary capacities such as punctuality, orderliness, cleanliness, obedience, politeness, honesty, faithfulness, justice, achievement, thrift, reliability, precision, and conscientiousness (Cope, 2008). Secondary capacities are more social-oriented, which is necessary for keeping up with social interaction.

These groups of capacities are inextricably linked, as secondary capacities generally indicate the learned ways of satisfying the need within the scope of primary capacities.¹⁰ Hence, basic concepts are formed (for example, I need to be obedient to be loved, an ideal world should be fair, or I can trust only those who always keep their word, etc.).

Love is defined as a primary capacity as the ability to have positive emotional relationships, which can be directed at a number of objects at varying degrees of maturity (Peseschkian, 2006).

Wagner also distinguishes love as a foundation-stone of humanity. In his letters, he wrote, "It is only in the union of man and woman, by love (sensuous and supersensuous), that the human being exists; and as the human being cannot rise to the conception of anything higher than his existence — his being, — so the transcendent act of his life is this consummation of his humanity through love" (Letters, 1897). Hence, there is no wonder why the ring symbolizing power is opposed to love and, in some way, represents the disavowal of human nature.

Alberich—the Nibelung—rejected love, and everything he does is subject to the ring's main rule (relinquishing love). In following the rule, Alberich remains strict and dedicated, showing his capacity for obedience to exteriority and his choice. In terms of positive psychotherapy, obedience is identified as following the requests, orders, and orders of an outsider authority figure. In this case, Alberich demonstrates his active and reactive modes of this capacity.

Wotan, in contrast, while allowing himself to experience love in different ways, is very strict and selective about those to whom he gives this love. On the one hand, he must follow the rules he created to stay in power (as his strength comes from the runes on a spear made of World-Ash Tree). Hence, he is forced to obey them and imposes the same order on everyone else. The disobedience of Wotan's word is heavily punished (for example, his punishment of Brünnhilde (opera *Die Walküre*). On the other hand, Wotan tries to undermine the need for his obedience by circumventing the rules. One of the examples is the birth of Siegmund and Sieglinde, twins whose purpose in the view of Wotan was to become heroes 'free of divine influence' so that they can bring him the Ring (that Wotan himself cannot take as it is a direct violation of the established order). Another example is Wotan's willingness to help and save Siegmund in the battle, which contradicts the rules — as Wotan's wife Fricka reminds him. As a result, he changes his order to Brünnhilde from helping Siegmund to ruining him.

¹⁰ In this case, capacities represent both: the need in something and individual's ability to use these capacities. For example, if a

person's need to be loved is satisfied, he is able to express this love to other objects with respect to the experience he had.

But Brünnhilde, in her father's likeness, adapted to his rule by sharing his views. Thus, seeing her father's turmoil and his need to obey the order he created, she followed the rule he gave first (meaning helping Siegmund instead of killing him), incurring punishment on herself.

Wotan's idea of using his power given by the World-Ash Tree to satisfy his desires while circumventing the very same rules by the manipulated hands of the third parties (and punishing them for that) demonstrates Wotan's drive for the order disruption and, consequently, as he represents the order, his destruction (discussed in the paragraph above). Thereby, Wotan's capacity for obedience is mostly reactive, as he demands it from others while letting himself follow his wishes.

This slow self-destruction (the one Wotan is most scared of) goes on in the background of his fear of death (symbolized by the fall of Valhalla) and his striving for power to save himself. On the topic, Wagner states, "We must learn to die and to die in the fullest sense of the word. The fear of the end is the source of all lovelessness, and this fear is only generated when love itself begins to wane" (Letters, 1897). Therefore, to some extent, his inability to love lies in Wotan's fear of death. In this, he is just like Alberich. Interestingly, neither of them masters the ring.

Brünnhilde, the Walküre, is not afraid of the end, and her love for Siegfried, alongside the understanding of the laws of the Universe, gives her enough power to break the curse of the ring, demolish the Wotan's order, and start the cycle anew.

Thus, characters bereft of love strive for power, trying to replenish the deficit through obedience and assertiveness. However, their inability to love (connect) with the Universe and comprehend its laws makes their internal conflicts resonate with the world order, either shifting forward separation (Wotan) or going back to fusion (Alberich).

Conclusions

The present research represents only a small part of the analysis of The Ring from a psychological perspective. Positive psychotherapy as a method provides useful instruments for the interpretations of the opera cycle, similar to metaphors. Using these instruments and understanding their work allows us to find deeper significance and meaning hidden in The Ring, revealing

psychological motives of 'why.' In retrospect, it seems perspective not only to use metaphors as an instrument of psychotherapy but rather broaden the use of positive psychotherapy as a 'thinking cell' in understanding life and culture.

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