

IMMORTAL BELOVED

[1995]

by

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Film biographies are a strange lot. We leave the theater with a feeling that we know something about, not the representation on the screen, but the real-life subjects. Herein lies the problem of bio-pix: The relation between the film and the real life of its subject are often nonexistent. Film makers not only fabricate the general architecture of a person's life, they also micro-manage his or her everyday conversation – something that cannot be known to anyone, especially a complex historical figure like Beethoven. Thus, it is fair to ask, who – or perhaps better, what – is a biographical film all about?

Biographical films are, first, what we, the people of the late twentieth century, need to know about historical figures in order to make better sense of *our own* confused lives. Biographical films are not windows to understanding the past, rather they are mirrors by which the past is seen in terms of the present. This rewriting of history for our present needs accounts for many historical films – but not all; not *Immortal Beloved*.

Another, more subtle function of a historical biography is to assure us that there are certain psychological constants that run unaltered through time and are the universe's ground rules that we, just as figures of the past, have to live by in order to become fulfilled human beings. *Immortal Beloved* is one of these.

We know that the film is not to be taken literally from its opening scene. On the soundtrack, we hear an orchestra tuning up, while at the same time we see a funeral. Thus, blended are a prelude to action (an orchestra tuning) and a post-lude to life (the funeral). Combining two events out of time and space in this way often signals the domain of the unconscious, which – like the dreams it generates – also operates beyond space and time.

What I find fascinating about *Immortal Beloved* is the aspect of the unconscious it explores: an almost textbook example of Carl Jung's theories about personality types. Jung proposed that there are basically four types of personalities (based primarily on how they process information): Thinking, Intuition, Sensation, and Feeling. Within a single person, all four exist as functions; it is just that the personality seems to favor one over

the others – the dominant function. During the growth of the personality, two other functions, the secondary and tertiary, can be integrated. The fourth function, the inferior function, remains, for the most part, submerged in the unconscious. It is only with the greatest effort that one can become even slightly cognizant of it. This inferior function is the source both of trouble and inspiration. And this is where Beethoven comes in.

Type, as it appears in cinema, is necessarily different than in real life. Not only is the type a manifestation of the personality we see on screen, but characters is also surrounded by *symbols* that reveal type and temperament. For instance, Beethoven's deafness is not only deafness, but a symbolization of his introversion. In real life, a deaf person could easily be an introvert or an extrovert; on screen, not so. *Immortal Beloved's* Beethoven is an introvert.

The film clearly states that Beethoven translates his personal experiences, like being stuck on the road on the way to meet his current lover, into music. This is not a translation in the normal, logical sense; this takes a special talent, one of intuition. An intuitive type can see unseen possibilities. In Beethoven's case, he is seeing music in every emotional experience. Thus, we can easily peg the film's Beethoven into Jung's schematic as an Introverted Intuitive. This is his dominant function. And the film's three candidates for the immortal beloved of the title? They are Beethoven's three other functions. While this may be a little too pat (the film even takes them in order), it is still fascinating to see how it is worked out.

The first woman is Countess Guicciardi. It is through his music that she falls in love with the man, who she at first finds repulsive. Here is a woman who lives through her senses – sometimes they are at war with each other (the physically repulsive man versus the attractive musical genius), and sometimes they drive her whole being (she wants to marry Beethoven, a societal impossibility in nineteenth century Vienna). Her relationship with Beethoven is based on sensation – she represents Beethoven's Sensation function.

Second is Countess Erdody. Clearly more mature than Guicciardi, Erdody has lived a full, though tragic life. She harbors deep emotions about her family and her marriage. While deeply in love with Beethoven, she refuses his marriage proposal because she is already married – she feels it wouldn't be the right thing to do. She also rescues Beethoven from a jeering crowd that has just discovered the composer to be deaf (they are responding to the oxymoron of a deaf composer). Throughout the film, her function is to parse right from wrong, not necessarily the surface values of right and wrong as defined by society, but something deeper – true moral values. In this way, she represents Jung's Feeling function.

With each woman, marriage is an issue. Psychologically, making permanent the relation with either the secondary or tertiary function could signal the end of exploration and growth. For an artist, this cannot be, especially one of Beethoven's stature. He must necessarily go to the deepest and perhaps the most uncomfortable reaches of his soul to tap into every drop of creativity available to him. Guicciardi and Erdody are too

comfortable, too easy. His inner journey cannot stop (i.e., marry) with either the sensation or feeling functions; he must go on to explore the inferior function.

The inferior function is the most fascinating. When conscious contact with it occurs, the personality is well on the way to wholeness – or destruction. If Beethoven is an introverted intuitive, the inferior function will be the opposite, extroverted thinking. The relation between the Ego and the inferior function is one of complementary completion. Remember the opening words of Beethoven’s letter, “My angel, my all, my other self ...” This is a fine description of the inferior function. Which of the women is an extrovert and a thinking type: obviously, it is Johanna, his own sister-in-law. She runs her own upholstery business (itself a nice symbol of “covering up” their relationship). We see her dealing easily with the outside world – business and customers – and being quite successful at it. She is both extroverted (to deal with the customers) and a thinking type (in order to have a good “business head”). But what clearly clinches Johanna as the inferior function is the love/hate relationship which Beethoven has with her. And, what clinches it for us, being buried deep in the unconscious, the inferior function speaks a language which can only be partially understood – thus, Johanna’s illegible signature!

It is thrilling to see a film so strongly structured on psychological principles. It gives clear testimony that psychological principles are at the root of all our experiences, including films. That Jung’s theory of psychological types could form so strong and so obvious an armature about which a film about Beethoven could be structured, is, to me, amazing. Even after years of exploring films from a psychological point of view, I am still – very often – taken aback by discoveries like these.