

Singin' in the Rain [1952]

by

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According to Carl Jung, who discovered that the alchemy of the ancients was actually a symbolic system that mapped psychological growth, the alchemical operations which lead to individuation include *calcinatio*, the burning reduction and removal of the surface layers to reveal the truth underneath; *solutio*, the bathing, cleansing and dissolution of preconceived notions; and *conunctio*, the final joining together of the purified and cleansed opposites in a union that will form a new entity, a whole individual and a conjoined couple. In this essay, these ideas are applied to the most unexpected of subjects, the Hollywood film musical.

Many critics feel that *Singin' in the Rain* [1952] is the best musical ever made. Why? It has wonderful songs, wonderful dancing, a light script, and competent and affecting acting. However, this could be said of dozens of other Hollywood musicals. Most critics, unfortunately, go no further. Going beyond film criticism, into film analysis, gives us the answer: Like most films that have become popular with a broad audience, it is, I believe, the psychological underpinnings that account for their popularity.

I hope two simple observations will help convince you. First, psychological analyses of popular stories of the past – myths, legends, fairy tales – have unearthed great depths of psychological meanings, while the stories themselves lack not only "literary" refinement, but also lack all the qualities that should make them popular: logic, characterization, thought, linearity, "good" writing, etc. Second, while *Singin' in the Rain* is a good film, there are many outrageously bad films that have achieved equal popularity (often despite the critics' cavils and warnings) and these inevitably have only one saving grace – psychological meaning. With this in mind, let's look more closely at the psychology of *Singin' in the Rain*.

The film opens with a miniature of its most famous musical number: it is raining. We see three open umbrellas, each with one of the star's names painted on it. Suddenly, each of the people holding the umbrellas – Gene Kelly, Donald O'Connor, and Debbie Reynolds – turn and stride toward us, singing about the joy they feel. This short scene (it lasts but a few seconds) is an encapsulation of the psychological progress of the film.

We have learned in the film's first few moments that rain is a very important component (in case we hadn't figured it out from the title). Rain, however, is an ambiguous symbol – especially in films. As heavenly tears, rain intimates sadness and loss (check out almost any *film noir*. If it is not raining, the streets are certainly rain-slicked). In the typical romantic comedy, the lovers meet in spring, woo in summer, get together in fall, and break up in winter. And when they do, the inevitable rain pounds on the window behind them. (Of course, they make up and come back together in the following spring.) The meanings of rain multiply easily. The external tears of lovers blend with the world itself in the form of rain; a woman's sadness pervades even the weather; a "real" man is not allowed to show tears, so these are sublimated filmically into rain, . . .

Rain, like all complex symbols, is like an iceberg, most of it is well hidden below the surface. For instance, the idea that water dissolves other substances is the basis for the alchemical idea of *solutio*. (It is Jung who pointed out that the alchemy of the ancients functions not as a formula for chemistry, but as a metaphorical map for psychological growth.) Before psychological growth can be achieved and reconstituted as a new entity, the elements that will act as building blocks must be transformed into a form that can be combined, melded. This is the *solutio* – a dissolving so that the elements can be mixed. *Singin' in the Rain* uses many alchemical ideas as psychological symbols! It does this both in the external world, in the forming of a relationship between a man and a woman, and the internal world, forming a whole individual by integrating his internal elements.

Now, let us return to the film's opening image. Jung tells us that three is the number of process; the three umbrellas indicate a process about to take place. The umbrellas protect the three individuals from the rain, from the action of the *solutio*. It is their road to psychological growth that will make it possible for them to give up their umbrellas, enter the rain, and in that way complete their internal and external relationships. At this point you are probably saying to yourselves, "Ah, he's just stolen his own thunder and given away the meaning of the most famous dance number in the film." Yes, I have, but I want to look at the symbolic processes that precede Gene Kelly's famous dance in the rain so that we can fully understand its consequences and appreciate its meanings.

The film opens in 1927, appropriately enough with a semi-self-referential film opening and the arrival of Lena Lamont (Jean Hagen) and Don Lockwood (Gene Kelly). Note that the initials of her name have no span over the alphabet – they go all the way from L to L. She is a character with no breadth. The couple's last names both begin with L, thus linking them. Arriving, too, is Cosmo Brown (Donald O'Connor), Lockwood's best friend. Cosmo, as we shall see, lives up to the implications of his name: Cosmo for the heavens above and Brown for the earth below. He is the connecting principle, the Mercurius, that unites the opposites. (Cathy Seldon, by contrast has initials that span a large portion of the alphabet, even exceeding in breadth "Don Lockwood.")

At the 1927 film opening, an interviewer asks about a rumored marriage – the first mention of a *conunctio*, a melding of elements to bring about a greater whole.

However, this is a false *conunctio*, one that is not to be. The interview, during which Lena is silent (like the films she makes), leads to a flashback about the beginning of Lena and Don's movie career.

The flashback tells one story via the soundtrack, Don's narration, and a very different story via the visuals that accompany it. Don tells it like the audience *wants* to hear it. He succumbs to the needs of the social collective (leaving his own life in abeyance), he has spent his life building, and up to this point, believing in his Persona, that external portion of ourselves that we present to the public and that protects our inner core from unwanted and unhealthy intrusions. The visuals tell the truth of a poverty-ridden upbringing which he translates on the soundtrack into the sophistication that the collective/audience expects. Don speaks of an Academy of Fine Arts training, while we see him as the brunt of vaudeville slapstick, etc. The necessity to live up to the expectations of the collective will plague Don throughout the film. His journey must be away from the demands of the collective and toward independence, one of individuation.

During this flashback, we learn that Don's entry into the film business was as a stunt man – one who suffers outward pain, but, in reality, is faking. Part of Don's journey into the Self will be to learn to experience real pain and to use its consequences for personal growth. This is further emphasized by the fact that the films they are making are silent films, films that have no voice. I am not making a value judgment here between sound and silent films, I simply want to point out that they have quite different meanings at the symbolic level. What finally propels Don on his journey toward individuation is the coming of sound to film, that is, the opportunity for him to speak, to have a voice, to express himself. As we shall see, through a series of synchronistic circumstances, his new voice will not be in service to the social collective, but it will be the voice of his soul.

During this flashback, we meet Lena, still without a voice even in non-film situations. She adores Don when he is a star and ignores him when he is a mere stunt man. He rejects her with equal disdain. Here is the ill-fated *conunctio*, bound to fail. Their partnership generates a series of silent film hits which Don finds repetitive and interchangeable. If we take these films as a form of expression, this indicates that Don (unconsciously at this point) hungers for growth beyond his comfortable – and successful – well-worn path.

Lena, it turns out, has a loud, raucous, abrasive voice and a way of expressing herself – replete with malapropisms – that instantly demonstrate her naiveté. Apparently because of the articles about herself she has read in fan magazines, she believes that Don is in love with her. Again, we see the seductive influence of the social collective, which, according to this film, must be recognized, resisted, and overcome. Lena finds this task too daunting and is fated to fail, to have no growth, no *conunctio*. She doesn't have the proper "voice," and, because she has totally committed herself (her Self) to the social collective, she never will achieve a voice.

The historical flashback at the film opening is completed. As Don leaves the premier, his car breaks down. Just as the success of film technology leads to his symbolic

silence, so the breakdown of motor technology leads synchronistically to Don's meeting with the correct voice, the correct feminine, and the correct other who will form the propitious *conunctio*. Escaping from a gaggle of adoring fans who rend his clothes (another expression of the collective destroying his Persona), he literally falls into a car (one that works) and meets Cathy Seldon (Debbie Reynolds). However, like Don himself, Cathy is too preoccupied with the demands of the social collective and lies about her career: she haughtily claims to be a stage actress (and better than a mere film star), though she actually works at popping out of cakes at parties (the symbolism of which would require a whole essay in itself).

Cathy "works" not only as Don's future external partner, but also as a symbol of Don's internal lack – that is, what he has lacked so far. Don's encounter with the Feminine Other – in this case, his own internal doubts linked with the possibility of future growth – causes him to doubt his acting ability. At that very moment of doubt, Don sees a demonstration of a talking film. Clearly, these symbols combine to indicate that what Don needs in order to achieve his growth is to find his voice – to become a *talking* filmic projection of his psyche rather than a silent one. It is interesting to note that all present at the demonstration doubt the future of the talking film expect Cosmo – the communicator of opposites.

Seeing Cathy pop out of a cake (an obvious image that combines nourishment on a grand scale with the process of birth and re-birth), Don goads her mercilessly about being a "great actress." In response to being caught in a lie, she throws a cake at Don. Unfortunately (or fortunately) it misses Don and hits Lena. This shows symbolically the state of affairs: the various aspects of the Feminine cannot communicate, attempts to nourish go awry, Cathy's expressions are misdirected, and, perhaps most important of all, Don escapes unscathed. In order to grow, he *must* get dirty. And, at the emotional level, this is exactly what happens next.

Cathy disappears and Don begins his emotional journey downward. He becomes obsessed with Cathy. He feels guilty because she has lost her job. We can see that his response to her is one of the superego (guilt) and the ego (he wants to apologize). Yet, as usual, what is really happening is deep under the surface of his psyche: he has found the correct "other" with whom to form the *conunctio*, and it is the internal forces that now swamp his consciousness, take over his life, and lead him by the nose in the direction of growth. But first he – and she – must go through a painful *solutio*.

There follows a scene which demonstrates the split that Don must resolve. On the set, he finds out that Cathy lost her job because of Lena's machinations. During what appears visually to be a silent movie love scene, he tells her how much he hates her. What we see and what we hear do not coordinate into a whole (reminiscent of the flashback near the beginning of the film). Once this is resolved, Don will be a whole person. At this very moment, the movie they are making must be stopped in mid-production because the studio has decided to convert to sound. This is the time of crisis – everyone's true voice is about to be revealed and projected outward, both in the psychological sense and in the filmic sense. It will no longer be possible to do one thing

and to say another, the filmic projections and all that they symbolize must now come from a single center. And it is the discovery of that center than now occupies the film.

The first two consequences of the coming of sound are that Lena's abrasive voice prevents her from expressing herself in films, and, second, Don and Cathy are reunited. Cathy admits that she is taken by Don and tells him that she has lied to him about being a star and looking down on movie actors. Don apologizes for the things he has said. The erasing of the influence of the social collective allows the beginning of the *conunctio*. However, Don uses a movie set – light, wind, atmosphere – to express his feelings. His communication is still modulated by cinematic apparatus – always in service to the social collective – and does not come directly from his soul. There is more work yet to be done.

There are indications, even at this early point in the journey of healing, that it will turn out well. Lena goes to take diction lessons, to attempt to get a voice of her own. This ends in disaster – there is no hope that she can change her voice (and all that it represents). Don does the same, but, with the help of Cosmo, their diction lesson turns into a joyful song and dance. To further emphasize that Lena is stuck in silence (that is, silent films), when they try to record her voice, Lena has endless trouble using a microphone – she cannot find her voice, nor can the projective apparatus give her one.

The film they are making bombs with the audiences because – you guessed it – Lena's voice and diction are impossible. The film mechanism also fails – voices go out of synch. Obviously, this is the wrong road toward growth. Now, Cosmo gets the idea of turning the bomb into a musical. While still fraught with obstacles, this road will lead to success. At the very moment they decide to turn the swashbuckling disaster into a musical, it is raining outside – the *solutio* has begun. But the time is not yet ripe for complete immersion. The dance number that follows, even though they are dancing indoors, involves raincoats – they still hang on to protection from being exposed to the cleansing rain.

The last problem (Lena can't sing, act or dance) is overcome by using Cathy to dub Lena's voice. There are two levels of falsifications here. Lena has a false voice and Cathy, too, is being false. But since Cathy is the positive part of the feminine, this falsity can be overcome. Cathy's achieving a voice, any voice, even a false voice, is enough to push Don over the edge into the path toward growth.

What follows is the famous dance in the rain. The high point of this dance number, and the film, is when Don closes his umbrella and happily drenches himself. (I will not parse this dance. It deserves an essay in itself. As you watch, you will see that each piece of choreography represents various aspects of Don's growth in recapitulation, how each stage has been challenged, and what it bodes for the future). The *solutio* has arrived. All that remains is to establish the *conunctio*. The only barrier remaining is to demonstrate the truth to the collective, this will be accomplished through the alchemical operation of *calcinatio*.

Once the new musical film is completed, all involved must once again face the social collective. But now, because the psychic foundations of all involved (except Lena) have changed away from stasis toward growth, the collective responds differently – positively. The film is rescued from oblivion by being turned into a musical dance film – the dance symbolizes the coordination of the various aspects of the psyches involved and the psyches of the various people involved. And this all-important dance number is no longer placed in the costumed past. By being performed “today” (modernity represents the present in which the results of the psychic growth must be experienced) rather than being only a costume period piece in which all that psychic work would be uselessly left on the sterile shelf of history. In this way, the film's psychology is made relevant.

Among the many symbolic layers in the complex musical dance number that follows, Broadway Melody, is the fact that Don Lockwood dances a single song in several different styles: low vaudeville, cheap theater, and sophisticated Broadway. This is a nice recap of his progress: a single "dance" that he has danced at many different levels of refinement shows how he has matured, breaking down the internal and external barriers that now make the ultimate joining possible. Rather than rejecting the past, he has learned from it and is able to embrace it.

Cathy re-records all of Lena's dialogue. Don confesses his love for Cathy and in the same breath dismisses the importance of his fans. He has finally returned to himself. Of course, Lena bursts in and, in a jealous rage and unaware of the dubbing, exerts her authority with the studio bosses. In a desperate attempt, Lena begins a false publicity campaign, claiming she does her own singing. Lena attempts to manipulate the collective and keep Cathy's role a secret. Of course, once psychic energies have begun to flow, it is impossible to keep them in check, especially with the alchemical preparation of the various *solutio* operations. All that remains is the *calcinatio*, the burning off of the false layers to reveal the truth.

This takes place at the premier of the new sound film (the story has now come full circle, as it began with the premier of a silent film. But note the very significant difference: silent *versus* sound.). In a reckless act of hubris, Lena insists on singing a song "live" to the audience with Cathy behind the curtain singing for her. Cosmo (the Mercury figure), together with Don and the studio boss (a return to the number three that began the picture), raise the curtain so all can see the deception. This act of fiery ablation, *calcinatio*, reveals the truth to all. The final *conunctio* between Don and Cathy can take place. Now, because neither Don nor Cathy build their personality in accordance with the social collective, the public joins them together, the *conunctio* is achieved.

The alchemical operations which lead to individuation include *calcinatio*, the burning reduction and removal of the surface layers to reveal the truth underneath; *solutio*, the bathing, cleansing and dissolution of preconceived notions; and *conunctio*, the final joining together of the purified and cleansed opposites in a union that will form a new entity, a whole individual and a conjoined couple. While in most films rain is a symbol of sadness, we can see that in this film, it is an act of joy to be *Singin' in the Rain*.