

GRAY GIRL CONFERENCE

Steps to find a monster for poetry
by Inet Simental



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Gray Girl Conference

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*The little gray girl was paralyzed
when she knew she was born that day
she saw herself so old and fake*

*The little gray girl was so embarrassed
The little gray girl was almost naked
by violent words written for herself
by herself
because of herself*

One of the subjects that influenced my life the most was Dr. Frank Malgesini's poetry class. It was not only poetry that I learned... It was a journey of self-study. It all began with the first assignment: to write a poem. And I'd like to share this wild adventure of how my poetry character gray girl took over.

As theater director Jerzy Grotowsky said... acting is more like sculpture than like painting... the piece of art is trapped inside a rock, it is already there, there's no need to add anything external... in that sense poetry is also like sculpture and acting... all the material you need is in there... you just need to uncover it... to discover it...

To write poetry you don't want to write about something general like love or tragic love or the deadly struggle to find love... You want your poems to be original... What can be more original than to write about oneself? So, how do you begin?

You begin with the truth. You cannot write a true powerful poem about love, peace, joy, and happiness before you write about the other stuff... What if the other stuff is very negative? We know we are not supposed be negative people... but what if the other stuff is what is actually blocking you from really experiencing peace and love and all of those great values that all of us need and search for? The other stuff has to come out. It has to come out for you to really experience true peace, true love, true happiness... and then when you really can experience those you can write honest true poems about them.

The "other stuff" is poison. It's your poison. This poison is a substance that keeps you from neither growing nor changing. Change and growth is the healthy natural process of life. Peace, love and happiness are the highest stages of life and they are only reached after going through a deep transformation of the mind. When everything stays the same,

we get smaller and smaller. It hurts. The natural way of the human life is the longing to be better, to be useful and it's very painful when stuff blocks our growing. Poetry as other forms of art can be a healer, a tool to clean ourselves from our own toxicity.

Philoctetes from the Greek tragedy by Sophocles is an archetype that reflects this notion. He was a warrior who was on his way to the Trojan War when a snake bit him. The smell of his wound was so noxious to the other soldiers that he was abandoned on the island of Lemnos for ten years. Later the Argives go back to him and ask him to rejoin them because they need Philoctetes' bow to win the war. Edmund Wilson in his book *The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature* connects the wound to psychic trauma and the bow to the healing power of insight. Philoctetes had a creative personality, he chose to remain lucid after living sick and alone for ten years and he already had the key of his salvation. The creative chooses the road of insight instead of pathology.

This poison can take many forms... one of them is that of a monster. One can be afraid to release something like that through ourselves. It's a horrible stranger living inside our own skin, it's embarrassing to have it there, and we can just hide it, it won't go anywhere else. I didn't know that at the time, my stranger just showed up when I needed it. It was indeed a monster. I didn't purposely look for it. It just showed up when I was trying to do the first assignment in poetry class which was to write a poem about a curse. I was not brave enough to curse anything in the world. So, somebody else did it for me. It was just a furious little gray girl.

*Little by little
the true dimensions of the girl were able to be seen
and her aged bloody ugliness
frightened everyone around*

*The girl ran, ran, ran, ran, ran to hide inside a book.
The little girl, who didn't want to be a girl anymore
Letter by letter began to die.
She screamed so loud that she ripped her rotten throat, saying:*

**MAY ALL THE WRITTEN WORDS IN BOOKS BE DAMNED
FOREVER
MAY ALL THE WRITTEN WORDS
BE ERASED FROM THE UNIVERSE'S MEMORY
UNTIL THE LAST HUMAN STOPS BLEEDING
MAY ALL THE WORDS DIE
AND NEVER EVER IN TIME
BE UNDERSTOOD BY ANYONE'S EYES**

She kept coming back to help me with all of my poems. And by doing that I accepted her in my life. Without Frank's poetry class maybe, she would be secretly bothering me still. She visited me every time a subject for a poem had to be written. Our monster, our stranger is really power. Power we have not accepted. Power we have not claimed. Your monster will do things for you that you don't dare to do. Do not fear it, instead ask for help from it. Let it breath through your poetry, uncover its secrets. This is the healthiest way to let it be alive so that eventually it can die and leave you in peace.

My monster was an old lady trapped inside a little girl's body. Sometimes she was gray as a corpse, sometimes she was red from lust. But she was always small and ugly. The world around her was gray and bluish in a state of misery and putrefaction. She was weird and wrinkled. I didn't purposely look for her or designed her... she appeared and showed herself and different parts of her little gray life. Each subject of the poetry class was actually an opportunity to find out more about this persona.

Well, how to invite this kind of a monster into our lives to write poems...? For me it just happened. But what if it is nicely hidden that you don't even notice it's in there. It's a scary horrible monster indeed, but it will be nice to you. It may seem that it won't at first because its love for you is tough love, its job is to control your fears so that you can live your uncontrollable life... It secretly wants to be part of your actual life and that's why it betrays you keeping you from growing, so you turn inside to see what is missing.

*Freedom has been here murmuring silently
almost ripening the sound inside this neck
This necklace bitten by a scream
once lost a pearl
one
by
one
had been falling
into the muted past
The voice is getting used
to being free
to being freedom
outside this neck*

I don't know exactly how people can find their own monster, but I can think of some hints. First, make sure you have a pen and a piece of paper. Imagine you go inside your mind. By the way, many Eastern cultures and Native Americans place the mind inside the heart, not inside the brain... so, for this purpose the heart it's a good place to visit, but imagine

it's a dark place that only you can see... It's a region inside yourself that you don't even want to know about. What does it feel inside there? Go around that place to visit your monster. Where does it live? Is it a swamp? A desert? A forest? Is it mad at you for keeping it there? Is it happy to see you? Give it a name. The first name that comes into your mind.

There's another easy technique to find one's monster. What do you hate? What is it that you can't stand in people? Terrible things like for example... dishonesty? Chances are... maybe there's a real liar inside you. Let it breathe. Let it lie all it wants, all it needs... Get to know it poem by poem...

Once you find it, all you need to do is to let it speak. Forget about yourself and blame everything on it. That way I lost my embarrassment and I was able to speak the truth, after all it wasn't me talking, it was some gray girl that didn't exist... and I noticed and spoke about the most toxic thoughts and experiences that had kept me silent for so many years. And here is my monster, revealing secret pieces of myself to my one and only audience: Frank.

*The little girl was gray again.
The little gray girl wanted to look for what she looked for before.
But she was weird.
She was never a piece.*

*A cry of melting skin spread before the mirror.
The little gray girl,
trapped inside that monstrous body
whished in a secret to have what she wanted
and to find what she looked for.*

*The little gray girl realized that she started to turn red.
She took a shower,
but that color stayed.
It took her hours to cover her aged scarlet skin
and to erase the written wrinkles on her face.*

*Then she was not ready...
to go outside
again to go outside
to find what isn't looked for*

Days go by

*tears go by
the night comes
the mirror brakes
she's back into being gray*

*Sometimes, the little red girl
is as red as a rotten apple*

*Sometimes, the little red girl
is redder than blood*

Sometimes she is gray

Sometimes she is grayer than hell

*She is older than her skin
She is more than never
She is less than always*

Sometimes

*It seems that there is never a final period in the corpse of the little red girl
Everything is present continuous
A wicked play
No perspective
No past
No future
Just frozen inside an icicle of blood*

*The end is just a thought
a parenthesis
a terrible punishment since she was born a million years ago
a hundred years pass through her skin while an eternal second sticks in the
throat*

*The end is just not coming
and if it were*

she would not stand it

*The final period goes in here
but you see she looks for some worms to play
when she goes into the ground
Her funeral is sang but she is not really dead
So they stop*

*The final period should be near
but she ends up painting the wall
it was so white
she had to throw up
now it is real
she is sick and the wall is pleased
so she is courteously thanked*

*The final period could be here a nice decent end
but she has to sleep and she dreams and dreams
and wakes up but she forgets
and so like many times
she has to start all over again
and remember to learn what she learned*

*Blah blah blah
New paragraph*

Psychologist Carl Jung in his autobiographical book *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* explains how he went through a painful process of self-exploration that formed the basis of all of his later theorizing. According with *Dr. C. George Boeree, Professor Emeritus from the Shippensburg University Psychology Department*,

“World War I was a painful period of self-examination for Jung. And it was, however, also the beginning of one of the most interesting theories of personality the world has ever seen. He carefully recorded his dreams, fantasies, and visions, and drew, painted, and sculpted them as well. He found that his experiences tended to form themselves into persons, beginning with a wise old man and his companion, a little girl. The wise old man evolved, over a number of dreams, into a sort of spiritual guru. The little girl became "anima," the feminine soul, who served as his main medium of communication with the deeper aspects of his unconscious.

Critics have suggested that Jung was, very simply, ill himself when all this happened. But Jung felt that, if you want to understand the jungle, you can't be content just to sail back and forth near the shore. You've got to get into it, no matter how strange and frightening it might seem.

Jung adds the part of the psyche that makes his theory stand out from all others: the **collective unconscious**. You could call it your "psychic inheritance." It is the reservoir of our experiences as a species, a kind of knowledge we are all born with. And yet we can never be directly conscious of it. It influences all of our experiences and behaviors, most especially the emotional ones.

The contents of the collective unconscious are called **archetypes**. An archetype is an unlearned tendency to experience things in a certain way.

Jung introduced the concept of the shadow as an archetype. It is the "dark side" of the ego, and the evil that we are capable of is often stored there. Actually, the shadow is amoral -- neither good nor bad, just like animals. But from our human perspective, the animal world looks rather brutal, inhuman, so the shadow becomes something of a garbage can for the parts of ourselves that we can't quite admit to. Symbols of the shadow include the snake (as in the garden of Eden), the dragon, demons and monsters.

Jung gives us three principles of operation of the psyche, beginning with the **principle of opposites**. Every wish immediately suggests its opposite. If I have a good thought, for example, I cannot help but have in me somewhere the opposite bad thought. In fact, it is a very basic point: In order to have a concept of good, you must have a concept of bad, just like you can't have up without down or black without white.

According to Jung, it is the opposition that creates the power of the psyche. It is like the two poles of a battery, or the splitting of an atom. It is the contrast that gives energy, so that a strong contrast gives strong energy, and a weak contrast gives weak energy.

The second principle is the **principle of equivalence**. The energy created from the opposition is "given" to both sides equally. But what happens to the energy towards the opposite side the one that is not too good? Well, that depends on your attitude towards the wish that you didn't fulfill. If you acknowledge it, face it, keep it available to the conscious mind, then the energy goes towards a general improvement of your psyche. You grow, in other words.

But if you pretend that you never had that evil wish, if you deny and suppress it, the energy will go towards the development of a **complex**. A complex is a pattern of suppressed thoughts and feelings that cluster -- constellate -- around a theme provided

by some archetype. If you deny ever having a thought that you may find negative or embarrassing or too painful to talk about you might put that idea into the form offered by the shadow (your "dark side").

Here's where the problem comes: If you pretend all your life that you are only good, that you don't even have the capacity to lie and cheat and steal and kill, then all the times when you do good, that other side of you goes into a complex around the shadow. That complex will begin to develop a life of its own, and it will haunt you. If it goes on long enough, the complex may take over, may "possess" you."

This complex will eventually become the poison that painfully keeps you from experiencing new and healthier ways to enjoy and manage life. At that time I was simultaneously majoring in theater. I needed to be open, to act fearless, to be a healthy cynic with no embarrassments. Acting needs a neutral body and mind, a sort of a white canvas ready to be painted on. Acting requires a strong mind and body to be able to transform it, it needs to be in tune with neutrality to start playing. Having a monster inside trying to speak up when it is bad timing it's a heavy burden especially to carry that around acting. So I had my little gray girl complex blocking my mind and body and she let herself be heard through my poetry. I had a poor instrument for acting, my voice was small, my body was rigid, I constantly felt a heavy rock inside my throat. I felt exposed although I was not exposed at all, my own body prevented me from moving.

I remember when Frank asked me to stay after the class to talk about my poems. I was surprised when I understood that he actually liked them. He wanted to know what was this gray girl character. I wasn't sure. I said, it's only images that come into my mind. He encouraged me to keep writing and I did. Soon, I realized that the gray girl was actually me. And I took the opportunity to speak to my father. He had died a couple of years ago, and I hadn't seen him since I was twelve years old. He wasn't a subject to be spoken in my family. So, he became also an important character in gray girl's life.

*Father Lucifer,
Here is empty and hot.
I can't forget the darkness of your guts
nor your devilish voice
that promised me a fortune of gold...
well... I inherited the blood...
How's the weather up there?
Is heaven all right?
My hysteria is almost over, thanks.
But the flames keep burning my skin.
I'm studying*

*I want to be a clown
I'm here
I'm down here
Love,
Your daughter*

*Here in this little gray gray girl lies
Father Lucifer
and his seed
his red broken seed
May he be in heaven
with all his blessings
his curses
his war
his bloody cold war*

*May he be resting in peace at last
in peace at last
and*

forever.

*Father Lucifer swallows a cage
Father Lucifer is a dwarf
and he drinks it
to forget
that he forgot
he was a dwarf.*

*But
strangely sadly blindly painfully
his minute body grows and develops spaces to be filled*

*Father Lucifer then
always remembers
to drink
to forget
that he forgot*

why he drank.

If you let your monster get into the surface of your life it will eventually fade away. Your monster won't be a monster forever when you let it free. It will become a part of your normal everyday life... It seems that it can help you to become "you", more complete, more likeable, bigger, improved, wiser. Gray girl little by little began to fade away, the image just seemed to turn into just me. In this last poem of this series, she stopped being gray or red. Frank wrote a little note: Inet, this is excellent.And it was the end of the monster.

*I
closed my eyes
after living a day in the world and
my world woke up to live a night in my mind.
Four doors
The whirlpool made the floor blow*

*I
looked in the mirror and
I was four*

*I
went down stairs
people with smiles hugged me*

*I
also smiled and
I hugged
Me when I was four*

*I
showed the house to
Me when I was four
and*

*I
was hugged by
Me when I was four*

*We
walked outside
We*

*ran inside
We
saw the hidden ants fly and even though
We
never talked
We
both knew that
I
and
I when I was four
could wake up
'cause at the end everything will be fine
Just fine

And it was.*

I'd like to congratulate the Faculty of Lengua Inglesa for all these years of hard and disciplined work. It is a great contribution to our city and in a broader sense to our country. Thank you.