

Maps for the Midway Journey

A review of



Midlife Transformation in Literature and Film: Jungian and Eriksonian Perspectives

by Steven F. Walker

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Reviewed by

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Midway upon the journey of our life

I found myself within a forest dark,

For the straightforward pathway had been lost.

—Dante, *Inferno*

Jung compared the course of life with the day-long progress of the sun across the sky, with midlife marking a metaphorical and psychological “high noon” when youth begins to inexorably yield to age. Faced with the realization that forward passage no longer means a growth in strength but rather a decline in powers, we are confronted with the need to reevaluate our lives.

The concept of *midlife crisis* has had a firm grip on the popular imagination ever since Elliott Jaques (1965) coined the term to describe the compulsive attempts of middle-age

male artists trying to defy mortality by clinging to the remnants of youth. A similar 14th-century predicament may even have paved Dante's pathway to the *Inferno*, but although the poet's fear at having "abandoned the true way" may speak of a secret dread hidden in the hearts of us all, the scientific evidence for the midlife crisis as a universal constant is somewhat scant (Lilienfeld, Lynn, Ruscio, & Beyerstein, 2010).

Nevertheless, midlife is often a period of transitions, and the stereotypes of the disillusioned divorcée seeking momentary happiness in the purchase of an overpriced sports car or the aging professor in quixotic pursuit of a flighty young graduate student are creatures too near to the realities of our own experience to be altogether dismissed as caricature. Jung was troubled by the thought that modern Western culture was tending to overidentify with the goals of youth and noted that "whoever carries over into the afternoon the law of the morning, or the natural aim, must pay for it with damage to his soul" (Jung, 1989, p. 34).

Although society continues to celebrate the cult of youth and the Peter Pans of popular culture hold the media's fascination, our world is growing older. According to World Health Organization (2012) estimates, between 2000 and 2050, the proportion of the world's population over 60 years of age will have doubled from about 11 percent to 22 percent. The absolute number of people age 60 years and over is expected to increase from 605 million to two billion over the same period. Successful transitions into a healthy and productive old age are no longer the personal concern of each life traveler but an issue of pressing global importance. In his seminal essay "The Stages of Life," Jung concluded that human beings would not grow to be 70 or 80 years old if this longevity had no meaning for humankind and lamented the absence of "schools for forty-year-olds" in order to prepare for the second part of life (Jung, 1989, p. 33).

In *Midlife Transformation in Literature and Film: Jungian and Eriksonian Perspectives*, Steven F. Walker embraces Erik Erikson's concept of *generativity*, defining it as "an enlarged capacity for concern for the world and for the welfare of others" (p. 4), and persuasively argues that without large numbers of its people becoming generative, a civilization is ultimately doomed. In recent years, the world has had no scarcity of tales of "untransformed and ungenerative middle-aged self-promoters wreaking havoc in the economy and in political life," and, given the current economic crisis, it does indeed seem that "such pseudo-adults can bring a society to the brink of disaster" (p. 157).

Too long a grip on the fantasies of eternal youth can call up the dark twin of the *puer aeternus* archetype, the trickster who, heedless of excess and stupidity, delights in disrupting social conventions and the natural order (Gormley, 2009). Yet the trickster's flexible facility for boundary crossing and transformation also provides a capacity to escape a midlife impasse. Negotiating a clear route in the absence of accepted maps or pathways is a thorny task, but Walker argues that literature and film may help provide a bridge across this perilous gap.

Midlife Metamorphoses

Midlife is traditionally the time of culture building. Cultural performances such as theater, film, and literature, themselves replete with archetypal imagery, may be viewed as having a ritualized dimension beyond the merely aesthetic, with the power to awaken and transform their audiences. Walker acknowledges that a claim that literature alone may provide cause enough for radical transformation may be an exaggeration, but “when a person is ready for change, literature and film may become contributive causes, if not sufficient causes, for midlife transformation” (p. 27).

Walker writes from the perspective of a professor of comparative literature rather than that of a practicing therapist, but the idea that a piece of literature can be analyzed as if it were analogous to a client’s account of a dream or a fantasy dates back to Freud’s (1908/1962) lecture *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming*. For Freud, there was an analogy between acts of literary creation and the world of daydreams, play, and fantasy. We derive pleasure from literature through identification with this fictional world and experience the release of pent-up psychic tension brought about by “the writer’s enabling us to enjoy our own daydreams without self-reproach or shame” (p. 154). Thus, the writer’s experience of a different world can also open doors for the reader, confounding distinctions between self and other. Fiction has a peculiar power to carry us away (Cousins, 2011).

Yet Walker’s view is that literature and films have the potential to be more than mere diversionary pleasures: They may act to stimulate and inform one’s journey through life. It is difficult to disagree with his statement that learning something about midlife transformation through literature and film is certainly easier than experiencing it oneself. His eight-chapter exegesis of oneiric texts is a masterful guide through territory stretching all the way from ancient Sumerian myth to the modern films of Fellini and Kurosawa, with diversions into the *Odyssey*’s depths and the shadows of Victorian literature.

The reader may find some of the texts presented more substantial in their underlying meaning than others. For example, Walker’s examination of Fellini’s *Juliet of the Spirits* is scholarly and detailed, yet, for me, the statement that Fellini had been extensively introduced to Jung’s work divested this piece of some of its mystery, as if an illusionist had suddenly revealed how a trick was done. I appreciate the cleverness, I am better informed, but somehow the magic is gone.

On the other hand, Walker’s concluding exposition of classical Hindu perspectives on midlife stunned me into a genuine “peak in Darien” moment as, for the first time, I glimpsed a sight of the gritty truths hidden in this complex and ancient mythos. As a Westerner, I’d previously held certain preconceptions about the relevance of works like the Bhagavad Gita to my own experiences and cultural milieu, but, thanks to this book, the scales have dropped from my eyes.

Walker acknowledges that his position in adopting a gender-specific perspective to patterns of transformation in midlife may be controversial. His contention that the male archetypal model of midlife crisis involves the theme of the “death of the hero,” whereas for women it centers on the theme of “abandonment” is something that he concedes that he cannot prove in real life.


The stories he presents do illustrate the argument beautifully, but the female reader may find the passivity inherent in many of the central female characters grating. Perhaps we should remember that when Erikson (1968, as cited in Dowling, 1998) wrote that


the stage of life crucial for the emergence of an integrated female identity . . . is the stage when the young woman relinquishes the care received from parental family in order to commit herself to the love of a stranger and to the care to be given to her offspring (p. 159)

he was himself upholding a romantic myth, albeit one that a generation of therapists unfortunately followed.

Midlife Transformation in Literature and Film is an interesting and highly informative read for anyone interested in Jungian perspectives on literature and cinema and for those studying or experiencing midlife transitions. Possibly part of its value goes beyond its emphasis on the psychological importance of myths to a thought-provoking challenge: that perhaps both personally and on a global scale, we need to enact new ones.

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