

Article

# The transformative potential of psychache: A Jungian perspective

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**Abstract:** This essay delves into the Jungian concept of the dark night of the soul, which is a period of conscious suffering that results in increased wholeness, empowerment, and purpose in life. This article also examines depth psychological ideas on the self and individuation, as well as ideas about the teleological role of pain and conscious suffering in connection to the dark night of the soul. According to Jungian theory, a conflict between the Self and the ego that results in excruciating pain is what leads to suicide. This article emphasizes that Jung's idea of the dark night of the soul demonstrates the transformative potential of the psyche, which can be understood as a spiritual journey that results in spiritual growth. In order to ultimately break free from the darkness and gain a fresh perspective on who we are, it forces us to face our inner demons and face our shadow. Psychache becomes meaningful when it is seen as a means of achieving self-awareness. This viewpoint releases suffering from hopelessness thoughts and gives it a purpose. Numerous studies have demonstrated that the most common cause of suicide is psychache coupled with hopelessness. In the dark night of the soul, one opens up to the suffering, letting go of the uncertainty, believing that something is occurring. A new relationship to psyche results from learning to be fully present to suffering. Awareness of this process eliminates hopelessness and can prevent suicidal thoughts.

**Keywords:** suicide prevention; psychache; transformation; the dark night of the soul; Jung

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## 1. Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that over 700,000 people die by suicide every year [1]. Suicidal ideation and attempts have been found to be significantly correlated with psychological pain (also known as psychache) and hopelessness [2]. Shneidman's theory of suicide defines psychache as a passive introspective experience that includes loss, guilt, dread, shame, and humiliation [3]. According to Beck [4], hopelessness is frequently linked to suicidal thoughts and feelings. Individuals who are hopeless often have low expectations for the future, low self-esteem, or a belief that their situation will not improve soon [2].

Spirituality is considered a protective factor against suicidal tendencies due to increasing evidence that it can prevent negative effects related to physical and mental health, as it brings meaning to life and overcomes hopelessness [5–7]. However, the healing benefits of spirituality for the psyche and its role in suicide prevention are still not sufficiently explored. This article emphasizes the transformative potential of the psyche if it is perceived as a spiritual journey that results in spiritual growth. If it is perceived this way, the psyche is freed from hopelessness, which is often its accompanying element, which leads to suicidal tendencies [2].

The transformative capacity of the psyche can be compared to Carl Jung's idea of the dark night of the soul [8]. From a Jungian perspective, the dark night of the soul is about discovering purpose through a willingness to face the darkness [9].

James Hillman, a scholar and representative of Jungian and post-Jungian thought,

explores the problem of suicide from the perspective of the soul [10]. According to Hillman, “‘soul’ is not a concept, but a symbol” [10] (p. 46). He emphasizes that the terms “soul” and “psyche” can be perceived as synonyms. However, the term “soul” has “metaphysical and romantic overtones” and “shares frontiers with religion” [10] (p. 47).

## **2. The idea of the dark night of the soul**

The Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross coined the term the “dark night of the soul” in the sixteenth century to describe a time of existential despair and severe spiritual crisis [11]. A person experiences a dark night of the soul when they enter an emotional state characterized by hopelessness, meaninglessness, and profound confusion about life and its meaning [12].

Carl Jung went through the dark night of the soul in the fall of 1913, when he was 38 years old. In his Red Book, Jung [8] attempted to make sense of what had transpired during this time. The stakes were quite high because Jung believed he was on the verge of a psychotic break and that he had lost his soul.

Jung claimed that during this period he experienced “inner uncertainty” and called it a “state of disorientation” [13]. He describes that he “felt totally suspended in mid-air” because he had not yet found his footing [13]. Jung described this period of his life as his confrontation with the unconscious [13]. He claimed that the years when he was searching for inner images were the most important time of his life [13]. His entire later work stemmed from this. Jung’s descent into what he believes was the dark night of the soul resulted in his triumphant return to the world as a transformed person [14]. According to Jung, the dark night of the soul is a profoundly transformational time. Even though the dark night of the soul can be excruciatingly painful, overwhelming, and chaotic, it can also be a period of rebirth and transformation [12].

During the dark night of the soul, engaging in inner work through attention and respect for the unconscious content that manifests itself in dreams, fantasy, images, and sudden intense feelings or urges, a person gains awareness of the deeper layers of consciousness and moves towards the integration of the Self [15]. Finally, during the dark night of the soul, relying on myths and fairy tales can be very useful [9]. Myths can offer meaning and hope to a client’s suffering by providing context and hope. Presenting a myth to clients that symbolizes their inner journey allows them to express their hopelessness while simultaneously providing a possible solution [9]. Unconscious processes that are expressed in myths and fairy tales are revived by their retelling, thus establishing a connection between the conscious and the unconscious [13].

Jung’s depth psychology offers a new approach to the problem of suicide. According to Hillman, “Depth psychology rediscovered the soul and placed it in the center of its explorations. Now it runs the risk of losing it again under pressure from academic psychology. Academic psychology, in its eagerness to be as scientific as physics, has one-sidedly chosen the ‘outside,’ so that the soul no longer finds a place in the only field dedicated by its very name to its study” [10] (p. 50).

### **3. Psychache perceived as nigredo**

Instead of being useless, psychache and the internal instability represent a process of “dying and becoming” [11]. Hillman emphasizes that “the medical image of health, with its expectations upon life, simply does not allow enough for suffering. Medicine would rid us of it. The physician may aim to rid his patient of his disease because he views it as a foreign invasion to be thrown off. but ‘getting rid’ is impossible in analysis because (...) the disease is the patient. And the disease is the sufferingnot from which the patient must be saved but the condition necessary for salvation” [10] (pp. 158-159).

One can become more powerful, whole, and self-aware by confronting, accepting, and integrating the darkness inside of them. In this way, mental pain and hopelessness are overcome, which is one of the most important factors in the prevention of suicide. However, Jung warned of the risks of trying to manage this intricate process without adequate guidance. He emphasized the value of having an informed mentor to offer assistance during this challenging period, whether it be a therapist, spiritual director, or wise teacher [11].

Alchemical phases explained the substance’s physical transformations during the alchemists’ experiments. These alchemical steps are a metaphor that Jung developed to explain the psychological process of navigating the “night sea journey,” also known as the dark night of the soul [12]. Jung [16] related the alchemical stage known as nigredo to the dark night of the soul. The alchemical word “nigredo”, which means blackness or blackening, is connected to putrefaction and decomposition. The great suffering and grief that the forces of nature inflict on the soul is known as nigredo as a psychological state [17]. From a Jungian perspective, this is the psychological equivalent of turning inward after a traumatic experience, shedding our outer, public persona, and embracing the most fundamental aspects of ourselves—both dark and light [12]. This is the point where we enter the mysterious, black realm of the unconscious, where we meet our Shadow, or the hitherto undiscovered “dark side” of our personalities [12].

Depression, or “nigredo melancholia” [18], is seen by Jung as a necessary component of the healing process since it symbolizes the death “involved in being reborn” [19]. The final result of dark night of the soul resonates with Jung’s concept of the ‘Self’—the unification of unconsciousness and consciousness in the individual [11]. Ultimately, the dark night results in the birth of a new self, characterized by wholeness, rather than divided by the duality of unconscious and conscious [11]. According to Jungian theory, the dark night of the soul is a crucial stage in the individuation process. It challenges us to confront our inner demons and face our shadow in order to finally come out of the darkness and develop a new understanding of ourselves.

### **4. Jung’s concept of individuation: A spiritual journey to psychological wholeness**

From a Jungian perspective, suicide is the result of a conflict between the Self and the ego that causes unbearable pain, partly because of the difficulties that arise in

achieving individuation [20]. Because achieving wholeness and developing a conscious relationship with the Self means letting go of one's ego, these inner drives are frequently experienced in painful ways [21].

Individuation is the process through which a person recognizes his/her inner uniqueness and becomes a psychological individual, a distinct indivisible unity or whole [22]. Schlamm [22] argues that Jung associated this process with self-realization and set it apart from individualism and "ego-centeredness." According to Jungian theory, the dark night of the soul is a key stage in the individuation process. It challenges us to face our inner demons and confront our shadow in order to finally emerge from the darkness and develop a new understanding of ourselves [11].

According to Stein [23], for Jung, the Self is the transcendent center that surrounds and rules the entire psyche. Although the Self exists within oneself, one's conscious relationship with the Self is often hidden by the dominant voice of the ego [24]. The individual learns about the self through the process of individuation [9].

Individuation can be perceived as "a spiritual journey of psychological wholeness" [9]. According to Corbett [25], contact with the Self always results in a meaningful experience that reduces anxiety and makes us feel like we are part of something bigger than ourselves, which reduces any feelings of isolation or alienation.

When suffering is perceived as a gateway to self-awareness, it becomes meaningful. A sense of wholeness and inner authority that is based on meaning and empowerment rather than fear or lack arises from this conscious realization of the Self within [25]. Jung [26] argues that meaning materializes when people experience the realm of the symbolic and feel "that they are actors in the divine drama."

This perspective connects suffering with meaning and frees it from feelings of hopelessness. It is psychache combined with hopelessness that most often leads to suicide [2]. Bivariate analyses demonstrated a relationship between suicidal thoughts and actions and feelings of psychache and hopelessness. Suicidal thoughts from the past and self-reported likelihood of attempting suicide in the future were substantially correlated with the interaction between psychache and hopelessness in multiple regression models [2]. In the dark night of the soul, one opens up to the suffering, letting go of the uncertainty, believing that something is occurring [9]. A new relationship to psyche results from learning to be fully present to suffering. This involves turning inward and allowing dreams, images, fantasies, and other psyche manifestations to inform—possibly for the first time [8]. Awareness of this process eliminates hopelessness and can prevent suicidal thoughts.

This perspective is significant because understanding suicide from the perspective of the soul is not yet sufficiently explored. According to Hillman, "Enquires into suicide turn more and more to the psychological autopsy, i.e., individual case studies, to get closer to a psychological point of view. The examination of suicide notes, interviews with attempted suicides, and sociological case studies (...) remain fundamentally outside because they are investigations made for the sake of information about suicide. They are not investigations made about this or that person's soul with which suicide was meaningfully interwoven" [10] (pp. 47–48). Although there are various studies on the topic of suicide and spirituality [27,28], the problem of suicide from the perspective of the soul remains under-researched.

## 5. Conclusion

The prevailing belief in Western culture is that suffering is undesirable and should be avoided at all costs [9]. This Western paradigm is in direct opposition to the idea of a dark night of the soul. This experience of conscious suffering based on Carl Jung's idea of the dark night of the soul leads to the spiritual and psychological transformation, resulting in greater meaning in life. "Explanations from studies which show suicide as the result of confused reasoning degrade what the soul is going through. Explanations fail the seriousness and enormity of the event" [10] (p. 49).

For a person going through conscious pain, developing a new relationship with their psyche is a crucial step. This is accomplished by focusing on what is coming to light from the unconscious [8]. As one engages in inner work, they can gain awareness of the deeper layers of consciousness within and move toward integration of the total Self by paying attention to and respecting unconscious content as it shows up in dreams, images, fantasies, and abruptly overwhelming feelings or drives [15]. Since the client's mental life frequently involves classical mythical components, investigating a relevant myth, dream, or fairy tale contextualizes and intensifies the client's psychology. Most significantly, dreams, myths, and fairy tales make the connection between a person's suffering and life as a whole. From a depth psychological perspective, going into the dark night does not put an end to pain, but it does force one to engage with their soul more deeply and lead a more fulfilling existence [9].

**Conflict of interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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