

***Birth* (2004): Eternal Grieving of the Spotless Mind**

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Most summary plotlines of *Birth* state that Anna, a 35-year-old woman widowed for ten years, is on the point of remarrying when a boy comes to her apartment and announces that he is her former husband. In line with this précis, discussions among writers who have taken Jonathan Glazer's film as seriously as it merits tend to have given primacy of focus to Nicole Kidman's Anna. In privileging this character they are responding to cues latent in the text (some obvious, others less so). To mention the most obvious, the emotionally wracking predicament that afflicts the lissom widow is an inevitable source of narrative interest when a leading film star is playing that protagonist.

David Lowery remarks of Anna's grieving, 'If you look at this as the story of a woman who comes to believe her husband has been reincarnated, you are only seeing half of the film; you're missing the story of a woman realizing just how much she loved her husband, and how damaged her loss has left her' (2004). We contend, however, that the boy's story has equal thematic weight with Anna's. Not that the mystery surrounding the claims of ten-year-old Sean to be Anna's dead husband has been ignored. On the contrary, it has been considered extensively because the narrative thrust bears on the plausibility or otherwise of his claim. However, the intense experience that the boy undergoes has been insufficiently understood. Questions that have been largely disregarded include why a child should make such a claim in the first place; why (resolutely defying the outrage of his elders) he should stick with it courageously; and why he should then suddenly give it up.

The first words (heard in darkness before light hits the screen) are a lecturer repudiating the idea of reincarnation: 'I'm a man of science. I just don't believe that mumbo-jumbo.' This is Anna's husband Sean (Michael Desautels), who has framed his response in a mock scenario the irony of which echoes through the film. 'Let me say this: If I lost my wife and the next day a little bird landed on my windowsill, looked me right in the eye and in plain English said, "Sean, it's me, Anna: I'm back." What can I say? I guess I'd believe her. Or I'd want to... I'd be stuck with the bird!'

The opening shot establishes a register at odds with Sean's complacent sarcasm. As he jogs through the wintry gloaming of Manhattan's Central Park, the Steadicam glides after him, not at eye level but about twenty feet above the snow covered path. The shot continues without a cut for a long minute and a half while the man moves forward resolutely. At the screen's periphery, dim lights, vehicles and apartments bear witness to the city's life, but at such a distance that the runner is isolated by the snowfields around him, the absence of other people in the park and the camera's vicarious eye. That unblinking gaze insists on the actuality of what it shows while simultaneously abstracting it from reality via the gliding overhead view of the runner's back. But the black-clad and hooded man, a shadow figure if ever there was one, is brutishly anchored to the earth as he labours onward. The effect of trailing him is like attempting flight that cannot quite break free from Earth. The aesthetics carry this tension. As Darren Hughes notes, it is barely colour photography at all, but predominantly blacks, greys and browns (2006). On the sound track, Alexandre Desplat's Prelude propels movement. Flutes and bells sparkle sweetly over jabs of brass like metronomes that insist on time's passage, while sombre, spreading strings mark out the symphonic scale of what is to come.

Like other commentators (for example Hughes, *Ibid.*; Chaw, 2004 whom the opening shot reminds of the labyrinth sequence in *The Shining*; and Lowery, 2004) we notice resemblances to Kubrick's work. These are particularly marked in the establishment of a register comparable to *Eyes Wide Shut*. As Izod has written elsewhere, both films offer a take on the New York world that they project which embraces both expressionist fantasy and observable reality. Shimmying between the rational and the fantastic, neither film locks into either mode to the exclusion of the other (2006: 52).

Tension between contraries becomes explicit when the title *Birth* is superimposed on the second shot as Sean runs toward an underpass. Reaching it (silhouetted to stress his isolation), he staggers, collapses and dies. The short tunnel has, reasonably enough, been likened to both womb and tomb (Cozzalio, 2006). In evoking the birth canal it provides an image of a transitional space creating movement from one reality to another. However, the final shot of this sequence pulls back to reveal that Sean has fallen beneath a bridge. It makes an obvious emblem for connection; and in retrospect

we can see that thematically Sean could not have crossed over since he has given up on maintaining emotional connection. More immediately, the bridge underscores the thematic relevance of the next shot (explicitly connecting contraries) in which a baby is born. Death before birth. Glazer conjoins the opposing termini of life on earth in an order that reverses orthodox secular understanding. The more familiar conventions show the individual as a singular physical being existing from birth to death. The physical birth of Young Sean will be followed ten years later by his psychological birth. Immediately, however, the connection between Sean's death and the birth of a child can be read in two opposing ways – either as mere coincidence or as implying that this birth (like all others?) is rebirth. Throughout the film spectators are drawn to oscillate between sceptical and mystical positions; but the opening setup brings to mind *2001: A Space Odyssey* which concludes triumphantly with the death of the astronaut Dave and his rebirth as the star child.

The plot proper commences ten years later with a simple sequence that gathers significance as events unfold. Once again we are in a snow-covered landscape, but this time in a cemetery. Anna, isolated in the dreary waste by a long static take, weeps beside Sean's grave. Watching for her return from a car some distance away, Joseph (Danny Huston) is distracted by laughter from a funeral where mourners are amused by a shared recollection of the deceased. Only when we know Anna better can we realise that she would not have countenanced levity at Sean's interment – her unresolved loss the focus of blackest grief.

Anna takes her leave of Sean, trudges back to the car, takes a deep breath, looks at Joseph meaningfully and says 'OK' – nothing else. The reflected branches of winter trees frame the couple through the driver's window – a chill omen. Later we realise she has chosen this moment in the graveyard to accept Joseph's proposal of marriage. It is bizarre, to say the least, that she decides to do this at the very moment she takes final leave of her late husband. Is her grieving incomplete?

The engagement party is thrown in the plush Manhattan apartment where Anna has always lived with her mother Eleanor (Lauren Bacall). Decorously serviced by hired caterers, it is one of those nervy affairs where everyone seems to be tiptoeing on eggshells. Joseph, lit cruelly to make his facial features gross, relates a self-

congratulatory account of courting his hesitant fiancée – but she is nowhere in sight. Down in the lobby meanwhile an anxious woman makes her husband go up while she delays. Director of photography Harris Savides first establishes with this character a style of lighting actors' faces that prevails throughout much of the film. Little if any light reflects from the eyes, and what there is steeps the sockets in brown shadows that harmonise dully with the *mise-en-scène*. There's a subtle allusion in this to the living dead of horror films. If the old cliché holds true that in cinema the eyes are windows of the soul, then the psyches of the protagonists in *Birth* are veiled to the point of morbidity.

The anxious woman Clara (Anne Heche) reaches a decision, crosses the street into Central Park and scrabbles among leaves and dirt where she buries her gift. Then she buys an expensive replacement and goes up to the party. In the interim, her husband Clifford (Peter Stormare) has found Anna and affectionately congratulates her while apologising for the length of time since they last saw each other. We are left to wonder why there has been so long a break between people obviously fond of each other. Their ease evaporates as soon as Joseph comes to be introduced. He smoothly rids himself of a guest who belongs to Anna's past by inviting Clifford to 'enjoy the facilities'.

In the lobby ten floors below, a boy of ten has been quietly observing the comings and goings. Next morning, in a less affluent quarter of the city, this same lad Sean (Cameron Bright) sits on his bed. His thoughts occupy him so completely that he does not respond when one of his friends calls him out.¹

The child is barely established before we cut back to more celebrations in the Manhattan apartment – another winter evening, another meticulously organised and stolid event, a family affair in honour of Eleanor's birthday. The matriarch has both her daughters and their men living in the apartment. Not only Anna and Joseph but the heavily pregnant Laura (Alison Elliott) and her husband Bob (Arliss Howard) are at the table. However, the carefully buffed polish of these lives is about to be disturbed by the boy Sean, who arrives uninvited behind late guests – a synchronistic

¹ Although he is ten, his bedroom is still decorated to suit a six-year old, possibly inferring some developmental arrest.

surprise which will deliver them new experience to counterbalance their one-sidedness.

His entry coincides with the lights being doused as Anna walks through the flat carrying a birthday cake crowned by a forest of candles. Unseen in the dark, the boy follows her. Until the electric lights are switched on again, he seems no more material than a ghost, while the candle-lit Anna looks like an emanation of his imagining. Are they in the presence of the divine child archetype, the seedling symbol of future hopes and life's potential (Hopcke, 1989: 107)?

The sense that mystery is invading this home of moneyed blandness is further enriched by other factors. Kidman's 'extraordinary stillness' in the role of Anna has been likened to Maria Falconetti's evocation of Jeanne d'Arc in Carl Dreyer's 1928 film (Chaw, 2004). Cameron Bright invests the same quality in his playing of Young Sean. Both actors have razor haircuts that recall Falconetti's role. These striking resemblances and the hypnotic fascination that develops between boy and woman entice us to wonder how deep the connections run. Are both characters, like Jeanne, immolated by passions that they cannot evade?

When the lights come on, Sean disrupts the party by asking to speak in private to Anna. She first humours him, as those adults do in whom the presence of children encourages whimsy; but when he announces with certainty that he is her late husband Sean she bundles him out of the apartment. Her reactions first conflate hilarity and unease, but in the following days the unease intensifies when Young Sean sends her a note telling her not to marry Joseph. Her family resorts to mockery, which fails to conceal disquiet. In part their anxiety is aroused by the intrusion into their polished lives, in part, we guess, by concern for Anna's hard-won emotional recovery. More, Young Sean has chafed the persona of every member of this regimented family. Behind the polite masks of New York's upper crust, the boy's persistence excites discordant emotions of which they have no understanding.

Joseph shows the strain first when, denting his suave mask, he intervenes absurdly, like an alpha male pricked by jealousy. The boy has incurred his annoyance by personating the dead husband who has long been both his sole and soul rival. Ignoring

Anna's wishes, he obliges the child to take him to his father (Ted Levine) who happens to be in the building giving music tuition to a client.² The adults corner the child and insist he stays away from Anna, but over and over again, Sean says he cannot. The adults use no physical force, but the concerted effect is brutal, culminating when Anna bends down, locks eyes with him and tells him not to bother her again. With that the elegant couple, who are late for a formal event, stride off briskly; but as Anna departs she turns and sees the boy collapse.

Instantly the shuddering buzz of a hundred rasping strings overwhelms Anna's being, while the clomping of murderous goblin hoofs (pizzicato basses) evacuates her sense of time and place. This, the Prelude to Act 1 of Wagner's *Die Walküre*, takes over the soundtrack while Anna, no longer aware of her surroundings, is hauled by her fiancé into the opera house. As they enter the auditorium, the camera zooms from a wide shot of the stalls into a big close up. Having clambered into her seat, she sits transfixed for endless shocked minutes. As the shot runs, the framing (from slightly above eye level) combines with the increased flattening created by an extreme telephoto register to broaden the image of Kidman's face. She looks not unlike an agitated child on the precipitous edge of tears. The shock of Young Sean's collapse (doubly mordant in echoing her husband's death) has reopened her wound, leaving her helpless before the dawning conviction that the boy is her late husband reborn.

Kidman's extraordinary performance, augmented by Glazer and his crew into a great cinematic moment, leaves no room for doubt that a powerful mystery is being played out. She encounters the numinous in this episode – an experience charged with sacred terror. Although she has yearned and longed for Sean, nothing, understandably, has prepared her for that desire's obscure fulfilment. Although the film will show us other, mundane aspects of Anna's personality, the force of this apperception never wholly leaves her, nor those members of the audience affected by it.

The drama that Wagner's Prelude anticipates is relevant for two reasons appreciated by Robert Cumbow.

² Which explains why the friendly janitor allows the boy into the lobby.

Siegmund's arrival at Hunding's home ends up breaking up the marriage of Hunding and his wife Sieglinde, as the boy Sean almost does with Anna and Joseph's engagement. Second, Siegmund not only steals Sieglinde from Hunding, but beds her, even though she is his long lost sister – thus consummating a 'forbidden' love, like Anna's love for the 10-year-old boy who might be her long-lost husband. (Cumbow, 2006)

What does Anna's trauma reveal about her state of mind, interpreted in Jungian terms? Based on the premise that the completion of individuation cannot be done alone, but in relationship, we consider Anna to be in the phase known to alchemists as the lesser *coniunctio*. Edward Edinger describes the greater *coniunctio* as 'produced by a final union of the purified opposites, and, because it combines the opposites, it mitigates and rectifies all one-sidedness' (1985: 215). Marriage has thus traditionally provided an apt symbol of the completion of individuation. However, 'the union of opposites that have been imperfectly separated characterizes the nature of the lesser *coniunctio*. The product is a contaminated mixture that must be subjected to further procedures. The product of the lesser *coniunctio* is pictured as killed, maimed, or fragmented' (Edinger, 1985: 212). To illustrate this the dangerous aspect of the lesser *coniunctio*, Edinger cites alchemical texts originally collated by Jung that refer to the out-of-kilter marriage of a widowed mother with her son.

But this marriage, which was begun with the expression of great joyfulness, ended in the bitterness of mourning... For when the son sleeps with the mother, she kills him with the stroke of a viper. (*Ibid.*)

The concept of imperfectly separated opposites that characterises the lesser *coniunctio* fits not only Anna and Sean's marriage, but also Anna's relationship to Joseph and her fractured state of mind after her commitment to remarry. It also assists our understanding of Young Sean's attraction to her, where we are in the richly ambivalent territory of the Oedipal complex. Edinger again: 'for the alchemist, the mother was the *prima materia* and brought about healing and rejuvenation as well as death... The immature son-ego is eclipsed and threatened with destruction when it naively embraces the maternal unconscious' (1985: 212) – just so Young Sean collapses. However, Edinger continues, 'such an eclipse can be inseminating and

rejuvenating' (*ibid.*). Thus the image of the *coniunctio* refers to a phase of the transformation process, in which death can precede rebirth (1985: 214). When Young Sean enters into relationship with Anna he initiates a synchronistic event which has the potential to result in their mutual healing.

Like all new beginnings, Anna's engagement to Joseph brings with it not only the potential for joy (though it scarcely touches these two) but also vulnerability, which may spur a potential to regress. If the regression is consciously reflected upon, it may provide an opportunity for further growth. However, while Anna and Joseph's future marriage may be the immediate cause for each of their forthcoming regressions, it will not necessarily prove to be the root explanation.

The striking boy's advent may, as hinted earlier, signal activation of the child as a powerful archetypal image. It can either look back at the past of the person to whom it appears or forward to the future. As a retrospective figure, it represents emotions and unconscious drives that have been excluded or repressed as a necessary precondition to growing into adulthood. This occurs when the individual's development is constrained by the drive to enhance and specialise consciousness, a process which Jung found characteristic of Western cultures (1951: 162-3). Conversely, when the archetypal image of the child looks toward the future, it does so by representing nascent drives forming in the unconscious that are likely in time to enter and alter the individual's conscious. Jung remarks –

Our experience of the psychology of the individual... shows that the 'child' paves the way for a future change of personality. In the individuation process, it anticipates the figure that comes from the synthesis of conscious and unconscious elements in the personality. It is therefore a symbol which unites the opposites; a mediator, bringer of healing, that is, one who makes whole (*Ibid*: 164).

The child can therefore signal a change in personality before it occurs, presenting to the conscious mind as it does the early intimations of rebirth.

This early in *Birth* the spectator lacks sufficient insight into Anna's psyche to adopt with confidence any of these readings. Nor can we tell by focusing on Young Sean. One consequence of the driven, internalised power with which Kidman endows the

crucial scene at the opera is that although the boy's collapse jolts us through his overpowering grief, we cannot yet empathise with his suffering as with Anna because we cut away from him after he falls. The scene that follows the opera gives us a first, barely audible clue to Young Sean's state of being. As his father puts him to bed,³ the continuing pianissimo clomp of Wagner's bass line undermines any illusion that he has reached safety. The worried man tells his wife, 'He says that he's somebody else and he believes that he is.' The parents are not alone in failing to understand the boy's state of mind. That remains obscure, the mystery that protagonists and audience alike are drawn to solve.

Nevertheless it is plain that a radical change has come over Young Sean. When his mother (Cara Seymour) comes into his bedroom to comfort him with their good-night ritual, the boy refuses to be his old self: 'I'm not your stupid son anymore.' His behaviour next day confirms that he no longer fits his old world but is experiencing a second birth of the psyche. He ducks out of school and leaves a phone message for Anna to meet him in Central Park – she will know where to go. As Anna enters the park, unsteady on court shoes in the slush, a synthesised pulse like an anxious heartbeat draws a tense wire that dissolves momentarily into Wagner before she nears the fatal underpass. The point of view is identical to the end of Sean Senior's run; and echoes of Desplat's score for that scene (underlined by the heartbeat) emphasise the significance of the bridge. As Anna and Young Sean meet, a runner clatters through the underpass – a moment of synchronicity too striking for the spectator to miss, hinting that the boy and Sean Senior are connected.

Recovered from the shock he suffered the previous evening, the self-assured Sean asks Anna to arrange for her brother-in-law Bob to test him. His certainty shakes Anna and she retreats abruptly with an aggressive-defensive put down: 'You're just a little boy!' She wants to stop him getting any closer for fear not only that he might prove to be what she most desires, but also because (as the unfolding plot eventually confirms) she resists the stirrings of an awareness that his quasi-magical, synchronistic advent signals the coming of almost irresistible changes in the way she sees, thinks and lives.

³ Cumbow notes that the music tutor cannot afford black tie and opera (2006).

Although Anna has survived the loss of Sean Senior, it appears she has learned nothing from the experience and thus has undergone no further maturing of the self. Following the truth requires courage: Young Sean's persistence means that she will find it tough to dodge the truth on which he insists, that the horizontal move in her life to Joseph will not bring her the safety and security she seeks. The truth that will eventually be revealed is at present literally concealed underground. As Stephen Mitchell puts it 'Our conscious experience is merely the tip of an immense iceberg of unconscious mental processes that really shape, unbeknownst to us, silently, impenetrably, and inexorably, our motives, our values and our actions' (1993: 22). If ignored, rather than serve development of the self, the unconscious holds the potential to destroy. For Anna and Young Sean, the synchronicity of their meeting leaves neither of them real choice, since they cannot turn away from what has come powerfully from the unconscious.

In her turmoil Anna tells Joseph about the child's persistence. This second challenge from his rival rankles Joseph who escalates hostilities and has Bob put the boy to the test. The interview is recorded and in playback Sean's astonishing knowledge and confidence transfix Anna's family.⁴ Nor does the boy baulk at turning the tables, questioning Bob about his married life and recalling that Laura had not been thought able to bear a child.

Young Sean's answers reveal significant details about Sean Senior. He and Anna had married thirty times in thirty days at thirty churches. This saturated, fairy-tale quality colours Anna's romantic memories of her husband. But what can such obsessive behaviour mean in terms of their late relationship? Romance had fuelled their marriage, adding a quality of intensity and excitement to being alive and dreams of their future. But romance lives in newness, mystery, even danger, and may disappear with familiarity. Its intensity gives a false sense of a truly intimate connection which this couple had confused with a connection of depth. From this vantage point Sean's death can be seen as an emblem of romantic love that dies because nothing more real

⁴ Another moment of synchronicity seems to invoke the supernatural and thereby authenticate Young Sean's claims: a black cat runs between him and Bob during their interview.

anchors it. It may, as with Young Sean, excite the idealisation of an adolescent. Yet idealisation is, by definition, illusory. Rather, there are signs of addiction in the multiple weddings, an addiction like any other acting either as a counterfeit high or a container for undigested suffering and grief.

Emotionally, the blissful state of desire is what propels couples to bond in order to initiate a secure attachment – but it is not of itself sufficient to maintain and develop that bond. Anna has found a place where she can feel the spiritual high of the union she seeks in marriage without the hard work of becoming a psychological being. Her idealisation (bathed in illusion rather than a real relationship based on a depth of connection where both people are emerging) inhibits the necessary ego-self axis from developing as part of the individuation process. One of the most painful attributes of marriage is the eventual, unavoidable revealing of both partners' shadows. The shadow may give the relationship its spark but often couples avoid it by attempting to manage the negative emotions it generates (in which case the marriage may last, if firmly invested in comfort, but will not thrive). If the shadow is not consciously dealt with, the intensity of connection from the initial spark may die. One outcome can be that, like Sean Senior, the partners will look for it elsewhere. As each partner in an individuated marriage attempts over the long haul to understand and relate to their shadow by increasing their capacity to hold the emotional tension it provokes, they further integrate the unrelated parts of themselves, healing each other in the process and their own psychological splits. In Anna and Sean's *idealised* marriage (going to thirty churches in thirty days) they achieved no such understanding. Looking back at Sean's fatal collapse as he lumbered through fields of ice, we find the image that lets us see where the relationship became frozen.

Continuing the interview with Bob, Young Sean inadvertently alludes to the poisonous undercurrent beneath Anna's heady romance, although he cannot understand the implications of his words. He mentions that, as Sean Senior, he and Anna had lived with Eleanor because he was seldom home. Finally the lad takes control of the interview: 'Look, you can think whatever you want... It doesn't matter. I'm Sean. I love Anna and nothing's going to change that. Nothing. That's forever.' The challenge to Anna's family in general and Joseph in particular is now too direct to be ignored. They summon the boy to stay over at Eleanor's apartment so that Anna

can disabuse him of his delusion by proving her intent to marry Joseph. On arrival he moves round the apartment like a Pied Piper reversing the old tale, followed every step by the fascinated adults. He promptly lays claim to his old desk and identifies a visitor whose name he does not know as ‘the one that told Anna there wasn’t a Santa Claus’.

Cross-questioning the boy gets Joseph nowhere but he cannot stop scratching the jealous itch in his ego. Late at night he goes downstairs in the dark to gaze at the boy asleep on the couch and mutters, “You don’t have me fooled.” Plainly Joseph’s saturnine anger puts him into identification with the boy as, driven by irresistible emotions, he (no less than the sleeping child) drifts in semi-conscious realms. Although, with the exception of certain horror film cycles, the image of the archetypal child rarely figures as an adult’s shadow, Young Sean does take on this role in relation to Joseph. The man lacks soul, while the boy has it in abundance. This is a key relationship not only for what it signals about Joseph but also the family into which he is marrying.

Anna is intending to tie her life to a man with a materialist disposition as bankable as her parental family and Sean Senior, but lacking the scientist’s inquiring mind. Joseph fits well in Eleanor’s family because none of them has a curious, self-reflective nature. Sheltered in moneyed security whose realism is so insistently grotesque that it lays bare the fantasies on which it is built, their wealth encourages the delusion that the pragmatic empiricism of their professional and social lives endows them with a complete, all round understanding of life, notwithstanding their total neglect of the internal world. Their concrete minds lack the curiosity and imagination that accompany the inner child, both being qualities which act as guides to individuation. These adults are as emotionally dead as Sean Senior.

This holds true for Anna as well as the others. She is obsessive but not inquisitive – with an obsession so powerful that the boy/ man rapidly becomes the carrier of her animus projections to the extent that he almost (but never wholly) seems her invention. That she projects her animus onto a child (whatever the merit of his claim to be Sean Senior) may be, as mentioned earlier, the first sign of impending rebirth that connection with the archetype of the divine child often foretells. Alternatively, as

now seems increasingly likely, it may imply earlier narcissistic wounds that have yet to be worked through.

Indeed, the disturbance caused by Young Sean intensifies in Anna a complex of which she had no prior awareness. It erupts when she calls on her late husband's old friend Clifford to open her confused heart. With emotion battling reason, unable to make sense of her conflicted passions, she rambles on about her feelings for the two Seans, her suffering, her fears and her wishes – simultaneously knowing the child is not her dead husband yet aching for him to be – in sum, struggling to discover what is real. Eventually she manages to stammer that she needs help. She wants Clifford to intervene and stop her falling in love with Sean again. That she cannot see the absurdity of this request reveals her narcissistic choice of mate.⁵

As further evidence for the activation of a complex, the entire monologue concerns herself except when she describes Joseph as having *not* grown insecure over Young Sean. Since she could not be more mistaken about this since only Joseph's suave manners mask his anxiety, it raises the thought that Anna represses painful matters that she cannot fail to notice. In her fiancé's case the truth would force her to recognise that his devotion is not an all-encompassing shelter from the doubts and conflicts that come with all relationships. If this is a repeating pattern, she may have denied herself hurtful reflection on her husband's frequent absences from home by repressing the painful awareness that the marriage was not what she thought it was. The psychic energy needed to sustain that repression would add to her relentless grief for a perfect mate ten years after his death. As in all relationships, a constant calibration between closeness and distance – between what feels so suffocating it may threaten loss of self, and what feels too far away stimulating a fear of abandonment – is a challenging undertaking. If an early relational trauma has been suffered, the ability to sustain an intact connection may become more complex, ending in disruptions such as excessive arguing or passive withdrawal. Anna's prolonged grieving indicates that something was amiss both during and prior to the marriage.

⁵ Sean Senior as Anna's chosen love object was purely ideal, typical of an interrupted adolescence where the necessary phase of de-idealising the parents has not occurred to make it possible to separate from them and become a fully actualised person. (See La Planche and Pontalis, 1973: 258-259)

The next day, as agreed with the boy's mother, Anna meets Young Sean out of school; but rather than despatch him as planned with cold words, she takes him for ice cream and a carriage ride through Central Park – and discusses their mutual attraction! Following her appeal for help to Clifford, these actions can be seen as another aspect of a deep-rooted psychological pattern. Anna needs the men close to her to take responsibility for what she is unconscious of, her own shadow. She wants Clifford to stop her from falling in love. That only makes sense when we see her projecting her demons onto him. In summoning Clifford for help, she has unconsciously picked the very person who cannot assist because his own blindness (soon to be revealed) makes him as unconscious as her. In her previous life Sean Senior's role was to secure her in a hermetically sealed realm of perfect love (which his early death has sanctified) buttressing her world from the vagaries of human behaviour. Joseph is to replace her husband as a stable, middle-aged version of her former mate, forgiven his want of romance because he is wealthy and dignified enough to fill the absences in Anna's life. Young Sean's function in replacing Joseph as her reincarnated husband will be to reopen the tomb of impossibly perfect lost young love.

The date with ice cream and the carriage ride in the park are, as Cumbow (2006) mentions, a cliché of romantic movies rendered almost comic by the circumstances except that the familiar anxious pulse fades in again, mixed through Sean Senior's music. Afternoon wears into evening and Anna watches Young Sean – just a healthy boy in this – enjoying climbing frames and swings. Meanwhile Joseph stands like a jilted lover waiting for her in the window of a suitably grand apartment which Anna should be viewing with him as their future home. We zoom in long and slow with reflections of winter-dead trees once again darkening the glass. His self-absorbed face broadens just as Anna's did at the opera, revealing not the inner child he denies but the worn visage of a middle-aged man pushed near to breakdown. Joseph is caught in the Sol Niger, the darkening and depression of a man in the second half of life. Unable to regenerate himself because of a defect of heart, he projects his anima and thus cannot develop a feeling connection. Overly identified with male ego (which tends to overvalue power and material wealth) he nevertheless appears to feel something deep is missing.

Anna brings Young Sean back to Eleanor's apartment to hear the wedding music, arguing that it might persuade him to give up his fixation (another projection of her own obsession onto an animus figure). Joseph gets back from the aborted house hunting and is about to enter the bathroom when he hears the voices of Anna and the boy. The latter has stepped as casually as a husband into her tub. Had Joseph gone in, he would have heard Anna once again asking Sean to leave; but, rather than face his suspicions, he turns away. Evasion racks up his tension with his shadow piquing him horribly.

Soon the entire household is lined up in the drawing room to hear the pretentious nonsense commanded for the wedding.

It appears to be a chamber music recital, but what they are playing is soon revealed to be a rather silly version of the Bridal March from Wagner's *Lohengrin* that we know as "Here Comes the Bride," and we realize that this is another pre-wedding function. But notice that just as a performance of Wagner's *Die Walküre* became the centerpiece of the film's Act One, so this little mini-concert of another Wagnerian piece becomes the pivotal moment of Act Two. (Cumbow, 2006)

All the family (except the haunted Anna) are gratified by the music's confirmation of their good taste. Although opera goes, they appear blithely unaware of its ominous associations in marking the moment when the newly wed Elsa violates the sole condition her husband Lohengrin has attached to the marriage. By asking who he is as they enter the bridal chamber, she destroys the marriage, precipitates his return to the kingdom of his father and her own death. The scenario plays (if only Anna were aware of it) like an ironic epitaph on what she had left undone in her first marriage by failing to ask Sean Senior who he was. Had she the feminine psychic energy to initiate the necessary inquiry that she ducked, the death of delusion could have led to her rebirth. As it is, through neurotic repetition she risks replaying the whole self-defeating cycle once again.

Meanwhile Young Sean again disrupts the calm and goads Joseph by kicking his chair even after his rival orders him to stop. In a setup borrowed from Kubrick's *Barry*

Lyndon (Hughes, 2006; Cumbow, 2006), Joseph's rage erupts as volcanically as Barry's. He lashes out at the infuriating boy – the only time he does anything from deep-rooted passion. As when Barry runs amuck and his peers restrain him from slaughtering young Bullingdon, some of the men present hold Joseph back. He denounces the boy: 'He has no clue how to make something happen!' Yet his very outrage proves him wrong and what really exercises him is maintaining his dignity: 'I'm the one that should be respected, but obviously not...' Then he goes after the boy again and spansk him hard before the adults can haul him off. When finally secured, this scion of Manhattan's finest roars like a humiliated baby, 'He kicked my chair!' But it is the shadow child who has succeeded in ripping open his public persona to reveal Joseph's infantile rage. A child must feel possession over his love object to experience a secure attachment, but Joseph, with his repressed id let free has exposed his latent insecurities. The false self feigns arrogant security.

Anna gazes appalled at her fiancé's ungovernable anger, confronted with the vortex in his personality she had failed to notice. The other adults (a further echo of Kubrick's scene) are at least as shocked by Joseph's violation of social decorum as by his attacking a child. So when Eleanor watches him moving out of the apartment, far from rebuking him, she promises to bring Anna round. Eleanor knows a good marital prospect when she sees one and has no intention of letting her daughter lose this prosperous bachelor even though his usually impeccable manners have slipped just this once.

At the climax of the brouhaha Young Sean had grabbed his coat and run out, the cue for a grieving music that recalls the moments of sorrow after battle in war movies. Anna follows the boy to the snowy street where they kiss tenderly – as simultaneously both child with woman, and lovers. The scene returns to the apartment above and time passes. The sombre music continues with bass notes melded through synthesiser to produce a sound not unlike distant foghorns. Eventually Clifford arrives, searches through empty rooms (the brown gloom and slow editing never more evident) before discovering Anna in the kitchen. He has come, as asked, to save her from Young Sean. But before they can talk, the boy materialises and embraces him affectionately as a long lost friend. Although Clifford does his best gently to assure Anna that the lad is not Sean, she will not be deflected from her conviction (all the more resolute

after the kiss) that she has found her husband reincarnated. Her inflated mood shows that she has been touched by a numinous presence; she has no intention of giving up either the child or the troubled ecstasy he brings her.

Only when Eleanor sternly threatens to inform Young Sean's mother and the police does Anna reluctantly rouse the boy (whom she had previously installed in her bed at an hour suited to a ten-year old) and take him back to his parents in a taxicab. During the ride she begins to fantasise how they might be together. Anna is now caught in the grips of her complex, exhibiting the twin intensities of urgency and compulsion. Her perspective has shifted dangerously: for her Young Sean is no longer *like* Sean Senior, he *is* Sean Senior. A psychic boundary has been crossed between inner reality and external reality. It seems that if Young Sean is to reveal himself as a symbol of renewal, that moment cannot be long delayed.

It quickly becomes clear that matters cannot be reduced to a simple issue of whether Young Sean either is or isn't Sean Senior. Although Young Sean obviously loves Anna, something else is competing for his attention: the memory of an episode in Eleanor's apartment. While everyone else was occupied he had let Clara in. She had immediately instructed the boy to help wash her dirty hands (as if washing her shadow). To Young Sean it had seemed an odd command that he obeyed politely but without enthusiasm. Clara's order does not surprise, however, when we recognise that children are often left holding what adults are unconscious of (Clara is soon revealed as blinded by sexual greed).⁶ Now, some hours later, the boy recalls the engagement party. In flashback he remembers observing Clara's hesitation and following her into Central Park where he watched her bury the parcel. Clara, who has heard Anna rave about the boy's uncanny knowledge, has revisited the spot to confirm certain suspicions and has silently shown the boy that she knows. We realise that Young Sean must have dug it up and that Clara is now mutely confronting him. Retrieval of this package can be read as analogous to the discovery of what lies buried in the unconscious – a gift of wisdom that must be laid bare to consciousness. The ego needs the guidance and direction from the unconscious to lead a meaningful life – paving the psychic road between ego and Self.

⁶ Consciousness of the inner child can help direct emotion to transform relationships.

With his secret uncovered, the boy takes the package to Clara's apartment. It contains Anna's love letters; but Clara shocks him by disclosing that Sean Senior had been her lover. He had given his wife's letters unopened to Clara to prove how much he loved her. So brutal a twist to infidelity proves that his subjective experience of the marriage differed greatly from Anna's. It suggests a significant loss of connection between the couple had ended in Sean's emotional withdrawal and his unrealistic hope to find enduring love with yet another idealised mate. He seems in the affair to have attempted to revive the lost spark of which we wrote earlier – an impossible endeavour without psychological growth so that his death signals the dead end he had reached.

The revelation that Young Sean has read Anna's love letters appears at first thought to implode the intricate web of mystery surrounding him. It seems that almost all his knowledge must have come from the letters, though he may have discovered other details about the family in equally accountable ways. For example, he may have found out where Sean Senior died – something the letters could not have revealed – by chatting to his friend the janitor. Further reflection, however, shows that Young Sean's conduct cannot be accounted for solely by causal explanations. They do not explain many factors, not least the deep currents of emotion he feels and cannot fully control. Firstly, no one has put him up to making his extraordinary claim. Secondly, he does not have a scam in mind. Thirdly, the coincidence of his name and the dead man's may have triggered his interest, but the source of his fascination with Anna lies in the letters' expression of love; for, fourthly, he certainly loves Anna. How else to explain his much remarked, unblinking solemnity, his collapse and the sacrifice that he will soon make? Fifthly, how can we rationally explain that he recognises Sean Senior's desk? Or, sixthly, that he can identify the woman whose name he does not know who told Anna there is no Santa Claus? The answer may lie in his intuition.

Intuition can play a supreme role in individuation. It is experienced as if it delivers something knowable that mysteriously comes from a place beyond our conscious knowing. In that, it differs from instinct, which is a function of the corporeal senses. Intuition has a feminine quality not to be confused with gender. But Anna, caught in her gender role as a result of her one-sidedness, literalises the feminine whereas the

child's symbolic androgyny could serve as her guide toward integration of the masculine and feminine.

Sooner or later, every avenue of inquiry opens on Young Sean's soul. The temporal link between his physical birth and the death of Sean Senior opens the idea of reincarnation. Having said which, Clara's objection cannot be ignored that if he had been Sean Senior reincarnated he would have come to her: in fact he is unmoved by her. However, reincarnation can be considered symbolically as ancestry's invisible pull, linking individuals to both the personal and collective unconscious; and it seems thus that the boy has knowledge of past life.⁷

Clara cannot deny (indeed it arouses her jealousy) that Anna's letters have stirred great love in the boy. He has identified with Anna's need for a perfect loving relationship, and that has enriched his confidence to move from boyhood to young adolescence. It has endowed him with the certainty of his soul's connection to an imago of psychic love – the source of all human love that embodies the higher form of the archetype of relatedness. However, what he reads as the intense love between wife and husband at its most sacred and incandescent is knowledge that he can only receive as an innocent. The letters bring about his second birth.

Inevitably Young Sean and Anna seek different objects, his goal being a variant of what Erich Neumann terms uroboric incest (1954: 17). Her love letters initiate him into the mystical uroboric union of male and female for which his soul yearns. Renouncing his birth mother, he dissolves the primary union he had shared with her as an infant. Nevertheless, the new symbolic union with Anna that his soul embraces cannot be permanent. She becomes the deeply felt archetypal projection necessary to his development – part mother (providing ice cream treats), and part lover (romantic dates and the warmth of an enveloping pre-sexual eroticism). By definition, a symbolic union with what the mother imago represents (even in its variant form of

⁷ 'Our ancestors move along with us, in underground rivers and springs too deep for chaos to reach' (Wally Lamb, *The Hour I First Believed*, 2008 cited by <http://lauragerold.blogspot.com/2009/02/hour-i-first-believed-by-wally-lamb.html> accessed 22 August 2011).

Anna as mother/ lover) cannot be a state of the psyche that endures if the child is to mature healthily and differentiate into its own individuated self (see Neumann, *ibid.*).

Consumed by her own galling wants, Clara sees nothing of this. She admits to Young Sean that she had intended to vent hatred on her rival by making the evidence of Sean's betrayal an engagement present for Anna – but in the event, she could not go through with it. Ironically, if Anna had known the truth it might have shattered her hypnotic grieving and allowed her to move on (Cumbow, 2006). Be that as it may, Clara tells the boy that had he come to her first she would have explored the possibility of rediscovering her lover in him. Ten years after his death, she is no less in thrall to the memory of Sean Senior than Anna, with the difference that Clara has not been touched by the boy's numinous glow. Greedily she struggles with him and grabs the letters back.

Pounding kettledrums that recall Sean Senior's fatal collapse accompany the boy as he flees into the park in crisis. He climbs high into a leafless tree and remains there into the winter night. When the police find him dazed and muddy hours later (he must have slipped from his perch) they can neither grasp what he says nor catch hold of him. "I thought I was Sean but I found out he was in love with another woman. So I can't be him because I'm in love with Anna." As he runs off into the dark we, unlike the bewildered cops, realise that he has discovered something significant about himself. It is not the latest adult attack that has made him distraught, but discovering Clara's affair.

The boy runs to Anna's apartment where the maid puts him in the bath – a hint here of baptism cleansing the shadow to initiate rebirth. Anna comes home and goes in to him with a "plan" (both ludicrous and dangerous) that they should run away, wait until the boy reaches twenty-one, and then get married.⁸ This adolescent fantasy meets his pre-adolescent heart's desire, but he has to refuse. For although the mud still sticks to him, he now knows what has sullied him. Other children might have gone home to their parents with the police, but Young Sean speaks with more maturity than a child of his years or indeed Anna: 'I'm not Sean – because I love

⁸ Among many details that link *Birth* with *Eyes Wide Shut* is the way Nicole Kidman makes both Anna and Alice Harford coyly bleat the word 'married' like a spoilt girl.

you.’ He protects her by keeping secret both her husband’s betrayal and the disparity between the man and her image of him. Securing an adult’s delusion is a tough role for a child, but he does this heroically and at no small cost, personifying the wisdom gained on the post- modern hero’s journey. Anna brands him a liar, shakes him yet again with the fierce, self-centred emotions that he has found in all the adults outside his own family – and is lost to him as the woman he loves. When her anger gives way to tears (“You certainly had me fooled – I thought you were my dead husband”), self-pity stops her remembering that Young Sean had believed it too.

Despite the shock of Clara’s revelation, it has had a developmental impact on the boy. Having to face ‘his own’ betrayal of Anna, he has suffered a rude awakening from the uroboric condition in which he had been sheltering. It brings about his third birth, a transformation of the psyche that now becomes further differentiated in a form suited to a ten-year-old. Neumann describes the developmental stage through which the boy is moving.

Detachment from the uroboros means being born and descending into the lower world of reality, full of dangers and discomforts (1954: 39).

And again,

Detachment from the uroboros, entry into the world, and the encounter with the universal principle of opposites are the essential tasks of human and individual development. The process of coming to terms with the objects of the outer and inner worlds, of adapting to the collective life of mankind both within and without, governs with varying degrees of intensity the life of every individual. (*Ibid.*: 35)

We see the boy only twice more. Cleaned up after his bath, he sits with Eleanor by the front door, waiting for his mother to collect him – Anna presumably being too distraught to sit with them. Out of nowhere Eleanor says, ‘I never liked Sean.’ What has drawn this declaration? Here is just one of the interwoven currents of life among Eleanor’s family and friends that could have been scripted by Henry James. Bacall plays Eleanor as a steely matriarch who has always exercised power over her entire family with the exception only of Sean Senior. The boy has both reminded her of that and put her command over Anna at risk. So, her power having survived intact, she now finds no further reason to suppress disapproval of both man and boy. Old enough

to be Young Sean's grandmother, Eleanor could have played the role of wise old woman as head of her family, but she does not. Instead she rules, in place of sagacious advice having only sardonic put downs to offer, as when she first sets eyes on Laura's newborn daughter: 'Maybe that's Sean'.

Eleanor's lack of emotional engagement with either Laura or the infant is striking. Her coldness has left her children suffering from a lack of the mother's nurture. Indulgent and dutiful parenting is not nurturing. Anna's neediness and inability to work through her grief for her husband's death originated in her childhood feelings of emotional abandonment. So Eleanor holds for her daughter the archetypal image of the Devouring Mother deriving from negative experience of parental caring. In Anna's later life it explains a power relationship in marriage with parental overtones in which she subordinates as the younger partner. Eleanor's merging way of connecting is narcissistic in nature, leaving no room for another mind to safely develop needs and wants different from hers. If separation does not take place, the matriarch, so necessary, cherishing and nurturing during infancy, turns in the dawning light of consciousness to an imagined figure of darkness and destruction as she prevents the emerging ego of the child from differentiating itself from the unconscious and establishing itself in its own right (Neumann, 1954: 39-47).

Jung concluded from his case studies that,

It is not possible to live too long amid infantile surroundings, or in the bosom of the family, without endangering one's psychic health. Life calls us forth to independence, and anyone who does not heed this call because of childish laziness or timidity is threatened with neurosis. And once this has broken out, it becomes an increasingly valid reason for running away from life and remaining forever in the morally poisonous atmosphere of infancy. (Jung, 1956: 304)

He also saw that a woman who has remained bound to the mother typically lives through fantasies of a hero figure. A man who enters upon a relationship with such a woman 'will at once be made identical with her animus-hero and relentlessly set up as the ideal figure...' (*Ibid.*: 307).

This has been Anna's fate, still playing itself out in her thirties; and just as her own fate contrasts with young Sean's, so too the suffocating propriety of Eleanor's family differs from the homely kindness that prevails in Young Sean's home. His 'good enough' parents remain constant in support of their son and, once they have perceived the authenticity of his experience, never gainsay it. By thus making space for him to follow the demands that his own developing psyche places on him, they hold secure the family base to which he now returns.

As we have discovered, things are different in Anna's circle where repression and betrayal are commonplace. Anna has never admitted to herself the thought that Sean might have had a lover. However, as Hughes suggests, the religious intensity of her grieving may hint that she senses something unthinkable and represses it (2006). Another instance of repression is glimpsed when Bob, though a medical doctor, is embarrassed when Young Sean refers to Laura's supposed infertility. What unknown story lies behind that flicker of discomfort? For their part, Clifford and Clara behave awkwardly when in Anna's company. It seems probable that Clifford has found out about Sean's affair with his wife and the knowledge lies injuriously between them. In the negative aspect of her personality Clara is an embittered manipulator: witness firstly her wangling an invitation to Anna's party to take revenge on her lover's wife, and secondly her attempt to control Young Sean. However, when plunged into the dreadful predicament of a mistress whose lover has died, she would have found herself trapped in her secret without the socially acceptable right to mourn. It would be in character if, unable to contain her suffering alone, she had vented her gall on her own husband.

We see repression enacted as soon as Young Sean is out of the picture, when Anna goes to Joseph in his office (as her mother has counselled). Bristling with the majesty of a man unjustly injured, her fiancé ushers her into his boardroom and hears her out impassively. As Jung wrote of Joseph's type fifty years before the film was made –

The man finds himself cast in an attractive role: he has the privilege of putting up with the familiar feminine foibles with real superiority, and yet with forbearance, like a true knight. (Fortunately, he remains ignorant of the fact that these deficiencies consist largely of his own projections.) (Jung, 1954a: 90)

Unable to take responsibility, Anna declares (three times in all and not without tears) that she cannot be held accountable for what happened with the boy: there was no way she could have behaved any differently. Then she says (three times over) that she wants to be with Joseph and adds that she wants to be married, to have a good life, be happy and find peace. Although she does breathe an apology, her words only address her own wants – nothing about how she feels or what she might do, no inquiry about how he feels or what he might want, nothing about what they could share. After a pause to make the point that he is in control, Joseph responds “OK” (echoing her acceptance speech in the graveyard). She kneels and kisses his hand in fawning gratitude; and in this dreadful manner the deal (a negotiation ensuring Anna’s perpetual subordination) is sealed. Where there is no potential for growth, depression cannot be far away – the kiss of death.

The wedding, a stylish affair, takes place in May and at the family’s seaside villa (just as Eleanor wanted). While the guests enjoy champagne in the garden, a photographer puts Anna through the interminable poses required of a bride. As he does so her mind pulls away from the moment and immerses her in a letter sent by Young Sean. Long quiet chords for violins abstract us sadly from the celebrations while in voice-over the boy apologises courteously for having upset the family and making Anna sad. He tells about his life resuming with help from family and experts and reports that the spell has been lifted. As he speaks, we cut away to him sitting for the school photographer, now indeed a cheerful, ordinary boy. Nevertheless, this moment of synchronicity implies some form of continuing connection between him and Anna – a connection impossible for her to ignore.

Young Sean is free, but his final words, ‘I guess I’ll see you in another lifetime,’ hold Anna in the spell’s grip. The quiet strings surge as the world of this wealthy young woman – accustomed to wanting and getting, or at least getting the illusion of having what she wants – is ripped to shreds. We cut to hand-held shots at the beach where she staggers between sea and sand, rejecting both, crazed, unable to commit to death or life, belonging neither to the oceanic womb of the unconscious nor to the security of consciousness and the land. When Joseph finds her on this brink and embraces her protectively, she pulls back toward the waves, unable to respond to him, her beautiful

face distorted into a silent Munchian scream (*cf.* Chaw, 2004). Finally dragged by her new husband out of what seems an eternity of grief, she reluctantly gives way to him. Joseph gently leads his catatonic bride along the misty margins – their future together well outside the range of prediction. We can say, however, that although Anna may yearn for the beloved spiritual experience, and once again hope to find in marriage a feeling of completion in the greater *coniunctio* for which she sought ten years earlier, she has not made the necessary developmental shift to inhabit its psycho-emotional space.

All that said, this may not be the film's only verdict on Anna, because it has not quite finished – at least not for those who watch the credits roll. The sound of waves slowly fades, replaced (just as the title *Birth* hits the screen) by a trite tune that violates shockingly the register of all that has gone before.

I know that you belong to somebody new,
But tonight, you belong to me.
Although we're apart, you're part of my heart
And tonight, you belong to me.

This perky ditty was recorded by sisters Patience and Prudence McIntyre aged 11 and 14. Notwithstanding the coy, prepubescent sexuality projected by their rendition, it became a top five North American hit in 1956 ('Ronnie', 2003). Fifty years later, however, changes in society's attitudes toward child sexuality augmented by the tune's location, tucked into an ignored crevice at the end of the film, give it a raw impact. Its sudden intrusion, coupled with the harsh break of register, indicates an irruption from the deep unconscious, that 'chthonic portion of the psyche' (Jung, 1927/1931: 31). As we have seen, the intense, warded focus of Anna's mind (not to mention her family's defensive empiricism) has been so profoundly one-sided as to repress unwanted contents deep into the unconscious. However, the more energetically such contents are repressed, the more vigorously they are apt to erupt back into consciousness. This is equally the case for individuals or collectives. When repressed contents erupt, they exert a force that counters or complements the bias of the conscious position. Therein lies the function of 'Tonight You Belong To Me'. Its sentiments are wholly at odds with the empirical circumstances, with Joseph and

Anna now wed, but precisely in tune with what may be presumed to be going on in the unconscious. But whose unconscious? Anna's or Sean's (the boy, the man?) or somewhere their souls touch? Since we are dealing with the unconscious, we cannot know.

In the world of the well-socialised people who surround Anna (and who celebrate in Eleanor's hedged garden what they consider to be her return to the shelter of marriage), her fixation on Sean can be classified as neurotic and infantile. We interpreted her mindset in this frame, finding its roots in the impositions of a domineering mother and an absent father. The reading is legitimate but limited to what Jung termed the reductive analytical programmes of Freud and Adler – the former focussed on the sources of trauma to be found in childhood, the latter on the ego's urge to power (Jung, 1943: 35-40). Differentiating his approach to psychoanalysis from theirs, Jung argued that neurotic symptoms 'are not simply the effects of long-past causes, whether "infantile sexuality" or the infantile urge to power,' they may also be goal oriented, being 'attempts at a new synthesis in life' albeit they have, as symptoms of psychological distress, yet to succeed (*Ibid.*: 46).

The difference between grieving and mourning is well illustrated by Anna. In effect, she is stuck. She grieves to the end of the film and beyond, but she does not mourn. That would involve a process, a moving forward, and an accommodation with the imaginal world and memories of her first husband. In actuality, the advent of Young Sean intensifies her grief to the point where only an impossible union with him could resolve it. She seems therefore to fall into the type of people 'who have the whole meaning of their life, their true significance, in the unconscious, while in the conscious mind is nothing but inveiglement and error' (*Ibid.*: 46-7). We are drawn by Jung's observation to consider the soul once again: whether Anna is not transfixed by her craving for that other union, the soul's perfection. Such a union may be impossible in this life, but the appetite for it is inextinguishable where an individual like Anna is in the grip of an ecstatic passion. Through the recorded ages the intensity of ardent lovers' feelings for their beloved has seemed to them to have the quality of a sacred passion that can bring them to knowledge of the divine. Contemplation on the beloved person (like Dante's longing for Beatrice) generates a wonder so concentrated that it draws the mind of the lover beyond mere physical attraction to

penetrate the confusions of his or her emotional upheaval and attain a sense of being touched by the numinous. 'Sean', the doubled image of a godlike man-boy, who in Anna's mind has taken on the dimensions of the perfect masculine, is so powerful a presence that it ought to lead her to birth in the spiritual realm. Sadly no such release into the light appears likely because her conscious mind (despite the pressures to the contrary that 'Sean' exerts on it) remains powerfully dependent on empirical materialism.

A truly beautiful woman, Anna's soul (notwithstanding her infantile tendencies) is rendered hauntingly lovely in its anguish by Desplat's music. His themes, with their suggestion of otherworldly energy, augment her beauty and make her into an unwitting symbol for what she has the potential to be – in the particular Jungian sense in which symbols are forward-looking and constructive and compensate for one-sided, conscious bias (Fredericksen, 2001: 34-5). Her search for soul almost draws her into fulfilment and knowledge of herself, regardless of the cost – but not quite. She turns back at the sea's margin, unable to commit to total immolation.

Birth offers a radical alternative to the familiar perspective on protagonists in which they are understood each to have a psyche, albeit injured to one degree or another. Obviously the film presents such a point of view, but in parallel it plays with another hypothesis compatible with some Eastern religions, namely that on the contrary the psyche has the characters. This belief is related to the postulate that Jung called the *unus mundus* wherein the physical and psychic worlds are both held within the one cosmos (1954b: 538). In a universe in which psyche overarches the physical, Young Sean's farewell to Anna, mentioning that they may meet in another life, would be more than a self-deprecating and courteous closing line. Rather it would invoke with sincerity the wished-for prospect of reincarnation. In such a world Sean's karma would require that during his present life he give up Anna because as an unfaithful husband in his previous incarnation he had not earned the right to reclaim that role. He would also have to work out his earlier denial of reincarnation. For her part, Anna too would have karmic work to do. Before she could meet Sean on equal terms, she would need to find the courage to face her intuitions and follow where they lead her without hiding in repression's bolthole.

In the final analysis, *Birth* (perhaps playing to its presumed liberal-minded audience) commits to neither epistemological perspective but lets them both stand. To judge by blog reviews posted by audience members, the resultant conflict between opposed worldviews (to which the filmmakers cannily offer no resolution) is one of its distinctive attractions. Playing with so many linked oppositions, *Birth* challenges the audience no less than its protagonists to think – better, to feel their way through – issues relating to the development of the psyche and rebirth while in its very being reaffirming the value of fantasy in securing the psyche's integration.

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