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The imagination, the conscious, and the unconscious in Jean Cocteau's *La Belle et la Bête*

<https://doi.org/10.1515/sem-2019-0047>

Abstract: Charles S. Peirce's and Sigmund Freud's theories may be used to interpret Jean Cocteau's film *La Belle et la Bête* (1946). This film has a specific set of codes which connote its filmic language. Cocteau uses fetishistic objects as symbols and icons to reflect the psychological meaning of the film's narrative. Peirce's icons and symbols include the connection a person may make through the conventions and expressions of language a person links with the object or idea being observed. Peirce's semiotic theory functions as a theory of communication. His theory refocuses on culture. Freud's theories can be linked with ideas produced by Peirce in forming sign relations with the interpretation of the film and the role of imagination in the film. Especially important are Freud's ideas of repression, conscious and unconscious as they relate to Cocteau's filmic narrative and the film's main character Belle.

Keywords: Jean Cocteau, Charles S. Peirce, Sigmund Freud, imagination, unconscious

Cocteau's alternative world in *La Belle et la Bête* (1946) may be investigated through the writings of the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914). This article attempts to bring together the ideas of these two extraordinary thinkers, Freud and Peirce, and how the Surrealist Jean Cocteau (1889–1963) uses the artist's imagination in the unconscious and conscious symbolism and iconism in the film.

Charles Sanders Peirce developed a science of signs known as semiotic. His semiotic includes signs which consist of the icon, symbol and index. These three types of signs were in a direct relationship with his triadic relation of the sign, the object, and the interpretant (CP 6.347, c. 1909). Peirce states that icons, symbols and indices include the connection a person may make through the conventions and expressions of language a person links with the object or idea being observed. Signs, to Peirce, are made known through observation, experience and conventions. As Peirce believes, "A sign stands for something to the idea which it produces, or modifies. Or, it is a vehicle conveying into the mind something from without. That for which it stands is called its object; that which it conveys, its meaning; and the idea to which it gives rise, its interpretant" (CP 1.339, c. 1895). Thus, the sign is made up of the object which

the sign stands for and is involved in a mental process that occurs in the interpreter's mind, known as the interpretant, creating meaning. This article will use two of the three signs, the symbol and the icon. The symbol will be discussed first.

According to Peirce:

Symbols grow. They come into being by development out of other signs, particularly from icons, or from mixed signs partaking of the nature of icons and symbols. We think only in signs. These mental signs are of mixed nature; the symbol-parts of them are called concepts. If a man makes a new symbol, it is by thoughts involving concepts. So it is only out of symbols that a new symbol can grow (CP 2.300, c. 1895).

Peirce's symbol concerns meanings and how they change over time. Words such as wealth, bird, give and marriages are considered symbols (CP 2.298, c. 1895). A symbol is the idea that is connected with a word. It does not show us the object nor enact a marriage in front of us but we are to imagine those things and associate a word with them. A symbol functions as a sign denoting an object by a law, or association of ideas, which causes the symbol to be interpreted according to that which it denotes.

An Icon functions as a sign if it denotes certain similar characteristics and characters of its own whether any such object exists. An icon, therefore is anything, quality, existent individual or law, as long as it is familiar and similar to that object. Peirce (c. 1885, 1933) claims:

I call a sign which stands for something merely because it resembles it, an icon. Icons are so completely substituted for their objects as hardly to be distinguished from them . . . So in contemplating a painting, there is a moment when we lose the consciousness that it is not the thing, the distinction of the real and the copy disappears, and it is for the moment a pure dream – not any particular existence, and yet not general. At that moment we are contemplating an icon (CP 3.362, c. 1885).

Icons are based on similarities that produce a dream-like effect in our mind: we cannot tell, to a certain extent, the real from the copy.

Sigmund Freud was a Viennese physician as well as the founder of psychoanalysis. The *Interpretation of Dreams*, his seminal work, was published in 1899 and led to psychoanalysis as the dominant branch of psychology and psychiatry during the twentieth century. Freud's work had a major influence on the art world after *The Interpretation of Dreams* was published. His ideas were brought forth in the development of Surrealism with such proponents as André Breton who studied medicine and psychiatry (Dominiczak 2013: 1289).

Freud believes that psychoanalysis can be understood as the various artist's chance experiences and works and the instinctual impulses the artist shares with the world (1989 [1925a]: 39). He emphasizes that the principal aspect of psychoanalysis is the division between the unconscious and the conscious mind which makes psychoanalysis possible (Freud 1989 [1923]: 630).

The Surrealist's first manifesto was in 1924 and the second in 1929, both focused on the artists' imagination. The author Marek Dominiczak claims: "The Surrealists rejected rationalism and focused their attention on the imagination" (2013: 1289). Freud gave the Surrealists new ways of exploring the imagination and helped artists go from the painterly agenda of realism toward abstraction: a major change in the history of art (Dominiczak 2013: 1289). Cocteau focuses on the imagination in the film *La Belle et la Bête*.

The film is also the relationship of the poet's soul and imagination to his conscious and unconscious. Belle is symbolic of the conscious mind of the poet as well as the poet's imagination, and the Beast is symbolic of the unconscious mind of the poet. Peirce notes the following: "An imagination is an affection of consciousness which can be directly compared with a percept in some special feature, and be pronounced to accord or disaccord with it" (CP 2.148, c. 1902). Thus, the imagination is an aspect of the conscious mind.

Cocteau believed that to fully give credibility to the creatures that stem from our imagination they must be authenticated. It is a process of gradual, psychological transformation that the Beast comes to be the only human creature existing in an artificial world (Amberg 1972: v–vi).

Cocteau's objective in the film is to go away from vagueness into a precise thing that relates to Surrealism. Cocteau's agenda for preciseness is based on his notion of 'truthism' [vérisme]. He shows us things instead of telling us with words. They become facts even if these facts are unreal for audiences (Amberg 1972: vi).

Films show things instead of rely on words to get the message across to the audience (Amberg 1972: vi). It is in this vein that his frequent use of words such as "realistic" or "documentary" rather than "poetic" or "fantastic" relates to this idea of "truth is" (Amberg 1972: vii). Thus, in the film Cocteau shows us through pictures, with only the smallest amount of words, the meaning of the film.

La Belle et la Bête exemplifies the main character Belle as the imagination and conscious mind of the poet. Also, in the film, the psychology of the unconscious, desire, and sexual awakening are brought forth in Belle's character. The female subjectivity of the film and concept of equality is told through Belle (Hayward 1996: 43). As the author Hayward notes: "Cocteau's film's main message was radical for the times in which audiences (at least female audiences) appear to have understood at the time better than the critics" (1996: 43).

Belle, lives with her two sisters and brother Ludovic. They live on a farm but pretend that they are wealthy. The character Avenant is attracted to Belle for her Beauty and kindness. The brother has been squandering money and owes a great debt and is notified that he must pay up or go to prison. Meanwhile the father is struggling with debt since his ship has been lost at port. He doesn't even have money to stay at an inn. He goes through a forest in the darkness of night with a

storm and comes across a castle. There is a large door with his own shadow looming in front of him. The doors open and he goes in. There are white arms protruding out of the walls with candles that move insinuating the direction he should go.

The clock on the wall chimes, and there is a roaring fire, but no one is there and an abundance of food on the table. He is served his food by an arm coming out of the table. The fire goes out and he awakes and leaves the castle. He sees a rose and picks it for Belle. The Beast announces to the father that his roses are the most dear things to him in the world and that the father must die for his sin unless one of his daughters replaces him to pay his debt.

When the father returns home he tells his daughters his story. Belle wants to replace him but the father insists that she should stay at home. She leaves her home at nightfall and rides the horse, Magnificent, the Beast gave the father to take him home. Once there she enters the castle. A talking door tells her that she has found her room. There is a mirror in the room in which Belle looks into and the mirror states Belle reflect what's in your heart. The fur blanket moves by itself across the bed. She runs outside and downstairs. The Beast comes out of the stable doors and she faints.

Belle is in her room and hears something by her bedroom door. She opens the door and sees the Beast soiled. "What are you doing at my door at this hour?" The Beast asks her forgiveness. Belle states, "Aren't you ashamed, clean yourself up and go to bed." The next day the Beast says to her that he is thirsty. Belle goes to a fountain and places water in her hands for the Beast to drink. The next day Belle begs the Beast that he let her go back home to visit with her father. He let's her go and she puts on the Beast's magic glove and is transported to her father's house. She's with her father. He's states: "So that monster has a soul?" Belle states, "But then I look into his eyes, they are so good." Father says: "You manage to feel sorry for him?" Belle states "Father that monster is good," and her tears turn into diamonds. She tells him not to tell her sisters or they will take the diamonds.

Her brother Ludovic is feeding the chickens. Belle and her father walk out to his destination. The sisters and Avenant are nearby. One sister tells her that the pearl necklace she is wearing is magnificent. She gives it to her sister and it turns into an ugly rope. The father puts them back on Belle and they turn into pearls again. The sisters leave. Belle talks about the Beast's key to his treasure and states that there are invisible hands that wait on her. Later the sisters state that Belle is rich. Avenant and Ludovic want the Beast's treasure and Avenant exclaims that he doesn't believe in magic powers. The sisters stop Belle from going back to the Beast by pretending to cry. "Belle you must not leave us. We realize how much we love you. Stay another week." The sisters steal the key. Belle cries on the bed and soon is waiting on her sisters again.

The Beast desires Belle and touches Belle's chair where she dines and touches the mirror. He stumbles and grabs her fur blanket and puts it to his face with love and grief.

Avenant and Ludovic get to the Beast's castle on the horse Magnificent which the Beast sends for Belle. Avenant says the secret words and Magnificent goes. The mirror the sisters pick up and one sees herself as an old woman and the other as a monkey. Belle, looking in another mirror sees herself. The sisters throw the magic mirror onto Belle's bed. Belle holds the mirror and places a hand on it, she looks in and sees herself then the Beast crying in anguish and then herself again. She puts the magic glove on and goes to the castle but she can't find the key. She puts the glove back on and is transported back at the castle. The door opens to her room. She runs frantically looking for the Beast but cannot find him. She runs outside: "My Beast, my Beast, my Beast!" The Beast is lying by the water with smoke around him. She finds him. "Forgive me!" She exclaims. "Your glove will revive you. Help me . . . I am the monster you will live. Beast states, "It's too late." Belle, "Don't be a coward, get up and roar!" The Beast whimpers: "If I were a man perhaps I could do as you say. But poor Beasts who . . . to prove their love can only grovel on the ground and die."

Ludovic and Avenant come into the Beast's garden. They can't find the key that they had stolen from Belle. Avenant climbs on top of the Beast's pavilion (Diana's Pavilion) and breaks the glass and Ludovic lowers him inside. The statue of Diana awakens shoots an arrow killing Avenant who turns into the Beast. The Beast is now a prince who looks exactly like Avenant, but is not Avenant. The Beast tells Belle: "I could only be saved by a loving look." He continues: "Love can turn a man into a beast, but love can also turn an ugly man handsome." The Prince asks Belle if she loved the Beast and Belle tells him "yes." They take off to his Kingdom flying in the air.

The rose at the beginning of the film has many meanings. The rose creates a mental effect, a symbol, of the poet's soul. In the beginning of the creation of the poet, is the poetic or poet's soul. The poet's soul lures Belle to his castle through the father's sin of picking a rose for Belle. The rose is also symbolic of Western beauty and of the sexual object, as well as the sexual awakening of the main character Belle. As Freud notes: "'Beauty' and 'attraction' are originally attributes of the sexual object" (1989 [1930]: 733). Belle is also symbolic of the beautiful in humankind, while in the film the Beast portrays the ugly in humankind at first glance but on a second reading of the film, has a beautiful soul like Belle.

Freud's analysis of poetic and artistic creation includes the imagination, which was made evident during the painful transition from the pleasure principle, which is symbolic of the the Beast, to the reality principle, which is symbolic of the character, Belle. Freud notes that the artist, or in this case, the poet similar to the neurotic, had withdrawn from an unpleasing reality into the imagination; but

unlike the neurotic, the artist could work his way back to reality. His art, in this case, Cocteau's film, is the imaginary satisfactions of unconscious wishes, similar to dreams. However, they were different "... from the asocial, narcissistic products of dreaming in that they were calculated to arouse sympathetic interest in other people and were able to evoke and to satisfy the same unconscious wishful impulses in them too. Besides this, they made use of the perceptual pleasure of formal beauty as what I have called an 'incentive bonus'" (Freud 1989 [1925a]: 39). Thus, the Beast arouses the viewer's sympathy in the film and the perceptual pleasure of Belle's beauty is symbolic of the "incentive bonus."

In *La Belle et la Bête*, is the dream-like quality of the Beast transmuting into the Prince who looks like Avenant. Avenant is the ego of the poet and is part of the unconscious, the Beast. Belle's rejection comes about through the first phase of repression, a primal repression, that is the first phase of repression "... which consists in the psychical (ideational) representative of the instinct being denied entrance into the conscious" (Freud 1989 [c. 1915]: 570). Belle is fixated on rejecting the Beast's marriage proposals, so instinct remains attached to the Beast. The Beast still hunts deer and his hands still smoke. Belle, the consciousness of the poet, denies access to the unconscious of the poet through the act of repression. According to Freud, the ego is part of the unconscious (1989 [1923]: 629). The ego belongs to the unconscious which is not latent as the preconscious, if it were such it couldn't become activated without becoming conscious. This process of making it conscious encounters great difficulties (Freud 1989 [1923]: 631). As Cocteau notes: The marriage between Belle and the Beast "... is possible because Avenant, the Beast and the prince are one and the same. Otherwise Belle would run away from the handsome stranger. A great mystery combines the three men who approach her; without it, the film would be merely a crude chapbook" (2001 [1946a]: 137). They are one and the same, the Beast, Prince and Avenant. Avenant is the poet's ego as part of the unconscious, the Beast functions as the poet and the unconscious. Cocteau notes: "... I am sure that you will see how Belle perceived the eyes of the Beast in Avenant and loved the Beast; and how Prince Charming spoils the excitement, so she will have to start a family and, as the fairy tale says, have lots of children" (2001 [c. 1940s]: 143). The symbolic marriage between Belle and the Beast represents the unconscious and the conscious mind uniting with the poet's imagination in order to create children or rather, on the symbolic level, poems.

The eyes of the Beast are like the eyes of the Avenant, they are icons of the poet's vision. The iconic dimension, in *La Belle et la Bête*, is the dream-like quality of the Beast transmuting into the Prince who looks like Avenant. The eyes of the Beast are like the eyes of the Avenant, they are icons of the poet's vision.

Freud notes that it is more than repulsion which operates out of the conscious mind upon what is repressed (1989 [c. 1915]: 570). Belle's constant revulsion of the Beast, her rejection, is symbolic of the conscious rejecting the unconscious instinctual side of human nature. It is important that Belle constantly rejects the Beast's marriage proposals because psychoanalysis teaches us that repression is not in terminating the instinct but preventing it from becoming conscious. The repressed, as Freud believes, is an aspect of the unconscious (1989 [1923]: 573). The instinct is the combination of fantasy and of "frustrated satisfaction." This connection with repression signifies the main significance of psychoanalysis (Freud 1989 [c. 1915]: 570–571).

The act of fantasizing, according to Freud, begins in child's play which is later manifested in day-dreaming which is not dependent upon real objects (1989 [1925b]: 303). The poet's fantasizing begins with children's play then daydreaming, thus not relying upon real objects but upon the magical realm of objects. This is exemplified in Cocteau's film. In the beginning of the film the narrator even asks the audience to become like children again.

It is this acting like children that the audience can view Cocteau's film as a dream. There is little verbiage in the film but rather the film represents the poet thinking in pictures, his unconscious. The poet joins consciousness again through verbiage in the film, its narration. Freud believes that when one thinks in pictures it is more in the unconscious processes than is thinking in words (1989 [1923]: 633).

In this manner the film *La Belle et la Bête* functions as both poetry and the poetic. Cocteau states:

So I would distinguish clearly between a film that tries to be poetic, and a film where the poetry is incidental. Moreover, the poetic is not poetry. It is even probably that they are opposites. Poetry is a product of the unconscious. The poetic is conscious. They stand back to back, and a great number of excursions into the poetic contain not the slightest poetry. On the other hand there are realistic ventures which radiate a poetry that batches them in phosphorescent light (Cocteau 2001 [1948]: 38).

Belle is the poetic consciousness and the Beast is poetry, is the unconscious. The film brings the two together through symbolic marriage. Cocteau would proclaim: "But instead of losing all control, as one does in dreams, I celebrate that marriage of the conscious with the unconscious which brings to birth the awesome and delightful monster called poetry" (2001 [1959]: 175). The poet cannot make poetry without the conscious. Psycho-analysis cannot be done without the two existing together. The poetry of humankind is also dying in the film without imagination, without the conscious. Without the conscious mind the poet is only an unbridled, unconscious beast.

Freud believes:

The division of the psychical into what is conscious and what is unconscious is the fundamental premise of psycho-analysis; and it alone makes it possible or psycho-analysis to understand the pathological processes in mental life, which are as common as they are important, and to find a place for them in the framework of science. To put it once more, in a different way: psycho-analysis cannot situate the essence of the psychical in consciousness, but is obliged to regard consciousness as a quality of the psychical, which may be present in addition to other qualities or may be absent (1989 [1923]: 630).

Thus, Belle and the Beast are symbolic of psycho-analysis. They need one another for poetry to exist, through both the unconscious and conscious mind.

In the film, the father states to Belle, “So that monster has a soul?” Freud notes: “It is probably the spiritual part of man, the soul, which in the course of time has so slowly and unwillingly detached itself from the body, that is the object of this elevation and exaltation” (1989 [1927]: 695). He believes that there is “a benevolent Providence” that watches over us and is superior to us. He explains the following: “Death itself is not extinction, is not a return to inorganic lifelessness, but the beginning of a new kind of existence which lies on the path of development to something higher” (1989 [1927]: 696) The Beast when dying does not die but goes to a higher plane of existence with Belle. Unconsciousness and consciousness brought together bring about the imagination of the poet. Cocteau states this idea of the death instinct in the following: “Poets, to live, must often die, leaving a trail not only of the heart’s red blood but of the soul’s white, by which they can be traced” (Cocteau quoted from *Le Cordon Ombilical* c. 1962 in d’Anger 1999: 23). When the beast is dying, he is partly dying without his imagination, his conscious. Poets to create poetry must often die symbolically as the Beast dies and transforms into the Prince uniting the conscious and unconscious.

The death instinct in Surrealism is a negative pleasure given feminine attributes which is both ecstasy and the threat of extinction. It is the Surrealist sublime linked with the ideas of traditional beauty, which remains the feminine body. Thus, Surrealism’s sublime is beauty. Belle is the traditional beauty in the female body form in the film. She is the Surrealist sublime which causes the Beast’s death but also his rebirth. This is exemplified in Beauty leading the Beast from crisis into crisis by denying his access to her through marriage and through his remaining a Beast that hunts his prey connecting him with humankind’s instinctual nature.

The Surrealists were interested in the marvelous going back to medievalism through a fascination with magic and alchemy. The Surrealists believed the marvelous was linked with “the reenchantment of a disenchanting world – of a capitalist society that was ruthlessly rational” (Foster 1995: 19). The Beast, the poet, is disenchanting with the capitalist world, and is under a so called curse, magic spell, so Cocteau brings

about a re-enchantment of a disenchanted world through the symbolism of *La Belle et la Bête* through the charms in the film.

These magical objects contained within the film act as fetishes that are symbolic of the unconscious. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, the English vocable fetish was directly adopted from the Portuguese substantive *feitico* ('charm,' Spanish *hechizo*; both the Latin *facticius*, "factitious," meaning 'artificial, skillfully contrived'). The sexual aim in fetishism whether it be normal or perverse, is abandoned and is replaced with a sexual object that fulfills a fetishistic condition (1989 [1905]: 249). The Beast's magic objects fulfill certain fetishistic conditions, the mirror and other objects keep the Beast alive and are the source of his powers. The glove, the mirror, the horse, the key, and Diana's pavilion are the magic objects of the Beast. The mirror is psychoanalytically responsible for seeing people's souls and judging them. It functions as a charm possessing magical powers.

Cocteau states about Beauty that: "Its distinguishing mark is that it judges those who judge it, or imagine that they possess the power to do so. Critics have no hold over it" (2001: 1946b: 43). The mirror in the film acts as a judge of the soul's beauty. Belle's sisters believe they have the power to judge Belle, the conscious imagination. It is the conscious that can judge the sisters, it is beauty, it is Belle. Her sisters look into the magic mirror and see their faults as human beings. One sister is an old woman through her actions, the other a wiry monkey. Both are unflattering objects in western culture.

Cocteau believed his films were like dreams that have a certain absurdity to them in which the audience might not have thought or imagined themselves but that can experience them in their movie seats like they can experience the dreams they have in their beds (2001 [1949]: 40).

Peirce states the following: "A dream, as far as its own content goes, is exactly like an actual experience" (CP 5.217, c. 1893). He continues: "Besides, even when we wake up, we do not find that the dream differed from reality, except by certain marks, darkness and fragmentariness. Not unfrequently a dream is so vivid that the memory of it is mistaken for the memory of an actual occurrence" (CP 5.217, c. 1893). Dreams are like reality, they are not determined by some previous cognition, the dream is much like the waking world except for some fragmentariness which determines that it is a dream. An example of this is when Belle is transported by the Beast's magic glove and her speaking certain words for Magnificent to go in a certain direction. It is the magical quality of the film and the characters' actions along with the fetishistic objects that produce this dream-like quality of the film.

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Magnificent to go in a certain direction. It is the magical quality of the film and the characters' actions along with the fetishistic objects that produce this dream-like quality of the film.

A dream is similar to reality, and the dream does not depend upon anyone's thoughts about what was dreamt. The real are the characters being independent of what anyone thinks them to be. The film is like a dream in that it does not matter what others think was dreamt but exists from the poets' imagination, consciousness, and thus becoming a part of reality. Peirce thus defines the real as the characters being independent of what anyone thinks them to be (CP 5.217, c. 1893). The film is like a dream in that it does not matter what others think was dreamt but exists from the poets' imagination, consciousness, and thus becoming a part of reality.

Cocteau states about dreams and film the following: "A film is not the telling of a dream, but a dream in which we all participate together through a kind of hypnosis, and the slightest breakdown in the mechanics of the dream awakens the dreamer, who loses interest in a sleep that is no longer his own" (2001 [1949]: 40). It is not the process of a dream but the actual dream. If the viewer awakens from the dream – if the film does not convince the viewer of the dream, then it fails. Cocteau thus believes that humankind can create a world superimposed on the visible one – making an invisible world, visible.

It is the realm of the invisible, the poet's creative mind which is made visible through the medium of film. In Surrealism, as in dreams, there is no distinction between the real and the unreal (Foster 1995: 7). In the film it is the workings of the creative mind of Cocteau along with Peirce's symbolism and icons that create the surrealism of the film. Film also contains the element of time, Peirce believes, "... the present can contain no time" (CP 1.38, c. 1890). Film in its very nature deals with the fourth dimension which is time. And the present in the film contains no time because the audience is concerned with the present state of things as given to them by the artist Cocteau. Cocteau notes: "Man is a prisoner between three walls and it is on the invisible fourth that he tries to inscribe his loves, calculations and dreams" (2001 [1956]: 61).

Film is a combination of ideas that stem from the unconscious mind – using pictures – alongside words stemming from the conscious mind. *La Belle et la Bête* functions as a historical romance in which the aspect of make believe events in Cocteau's film act as reality for the viewer who is enabled to become the dreamer of the dream alongside the artist. As Peirce notes: "A historical romance connects itself, more or less definitely, with real time; but that is because it 'makes believe' they [the imaginary events] are real events" (CP 1.492, c. 1896). *La Belle et la Bête* functions as a historical romance in which the aspect of make believe events in Cocteau's film act as reality for the viewer who is enabled to become the dreamer of the dream alongside the artist.

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