

**THAT'S ALL RIGHT, MAMA:  
ELVIS PRESLEY, THE THERAPEUTIC SHADOW, THE MOTHER COMPLEX, AND  
CREATIVE SIDES OF THE SON-LOVER**

**Dr. Ari Katorza**

Historian, Music Critic & Cultural Studies Scholar,

Sapir Academic College

Israel

Email: [arikatorza12@gmail.com](mailto:arikatorza12@gmail.com); [arikatorza@bezeqint.net](mailto:arikatorza@bezeqint.net)

Phone: 972-54-4791459

**Abstract**

More than half a century after his breakthrough to superstardom, Elvis Presley is still a great icon in western civilization. As the "King of rock 'n' roll", he has been a symbol of America's cultural power worldwide. Yet, his is also a tragic story of the hazards surrounding fame, stardom, and the American dream. Yet, surprisingly, in comparison to other twentieth-century cultural giants, such as The Beatles and Bob Dylan, the academia wasn't too generous when it came to Elvis Presley. He was a "name" that was linked to sub-cultural theories and a capitalist product, but the academic research concerning Presley is not rich at all. There are hardly any serious academic writing concerning his music and life. Even though, he is one of the most well-known icons concerning pop culture during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This essay is about Elvis Presley and the psychology of the son-lover and the mother complex, and its impact on Presley's early music (1954-1956). I will relate to the historical background and to aspects of his music, but my main focus will be in applying analytical psychology and Jungian theory to understand his familial relationships and habitudes, in order to shed a light on some hidden aspects of his performances, recordings, and the libido of creativity that characterized his early works. I will concentrate on the Jungian analytical psychological theory concerning the positive sides of the shadow and the great mother archetypes, and the creative side of the "son-lover" complex at its center. In this essay, I will return to Presley's music from the early Sun era recordings, until his transformation to a superstar through the RCA conglomerate. In other words, I'll add psychological context to Presley's discourse, and concentrate on the projection of his relationships with his parents (especially with his mother) on his music and personality, in addition to other historical and musical factors.

They won't let me see Elvis [...] They're always keeping him working somewhere where or other [...] They're just tearing my boy's clothes off and we don't know if he's going to come back alive.

Gladys, Elvis Presley's Mother.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Dundy, Elaine, 2004, *Elvis and Gladys (Southern Icons)*, University Press of Mississippi, Kindle edition, Loc.4370-4373.

Decades after his breakthrough to superstardom and his pitiful death, Elvis Presley is still a great icon in western civilization. As the "King of rock 'n' roll", he has been, for more than half a century, a symbol of America's cultural power worldwide. Yet, his is also a tragic story of the hazards surrounding fame, stardom, and the American dream.

In this chapter I wish to approach Elvis Presley's early music (1954-1956). I will relate to the historical background and to aspects of his music, but my main focus will be in applying analytical psychology and Jungian theory to understand his familial relationships and habitudes, in order to shed a light on some hidden aspects of his performances, recordings, and the libido of creativity that characterized his early works.

In comparison to other twentieth-century cultural giants, such as The Beatles and Bob Dylan, the academia wasn't too generous when it came to Elvis Presley. In popular music research, he is a focus point of the discourse about 1950s rock 'n' roll music, and a symbol of the rise of youth culture and its economic potential power. He is also a focal point in the orthodoxy explanation of the hybridization of black and white culture during the post-war era.<sup>2</sup> Popular music scholar, Simon Frith, related to Presley's problem in relation to the academia as early as the 1990s:

Now, in one respect there's no reason why the academy should have any interest in Presley – it has never been much interested in any aspect of popular culture. And, in academic cultural terms, Elvis (unlike Dylan) has no redeeming features whatsoever. Everything he did was trashy and I doubt if he'd even heard of T.S. Eliot or Charles Ives [...] One reason for this apparent lack of interest is that the scholars feel that they already know Elvis' place in the scheme of things. This becomes obvious when we turn to the basic academic books.<sup>3</sup>

Frith reminded us that John Shepherd's book, *Music as Social Text*, has only two Presley references.<sup>4</sup> In the most general popular music's academic writings, Presley was acknowledged for his historical importance and an underlying logic of rock 'n' roll and youth culture, however, musical comprehension was set aside.<sup>5</sup> Frith suggests that since musicologists are interested in composers and tunesmiths, or at least innovative instrumentalists (e.g., Jimi Hendrix), Presley, as a performer and a singer, was located at the musicologists' blind spot. As for sociologists and cultural studies scholars, they hardly ever questioned the facts and myths of Presley's career. Indeed, he was a "name" that was linked to sub-cultural theories and a capitalist product, but there are probably more essays dedicated to Madonna in comparison to Presley.

---

<sup>2</sup> The main approach of popular music scholars is to relate to the rock music as a hybrid of white and black culture, but my preference is to relate to "White American" culture, not as a monolithic culture, but rather as a different sphere of a WASP and minorities culture, each one of which became "white" in different times during the American history. See also: Katorza, Ari, *Rock Jews: Rock Music, the Struggle for Social Justice in the USA, and the Conflicts over Cultural Hegemony during the Postwar Era*, Ph.D. dissertation, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2008; Katorza, Ari, *Stairway to Paradise: Jews, Blacks and the American Music Revolution*, Tel Aviv: Resling Publishing, 2017; Roediger, David, R., 2005, *Working Towards Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White*, New York: Basic Books.

<sup>3</sup> Frith, Simon, 1994, "Wise Men Say: Elvis Presley", *Aspects of Elvis*.

<sup>4</sup> Shepherd, John, 1991, *Music as Social Text*, London: Polity Press.

<sup>5</sup> Hamm, Charles, 1981, *Musicological Yesterdays: Popular Song in America*, New York: WW Norton & Co.; Frith, Simon, 1981, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure and the Politics of Rock and Roll*, New York: Random House USA Inc.

One of the most celebrated writings, and probably the most quoted, concerning Presley's music, is Greil Marcus' chapter "Presliad" in his book *Mystery Train*.<sup>6</sup> It is an intellectual work, although not academic per se. Marcus located Presley's contribution to the post-war popular culture and music as a fine example and part of the American southern mythology and embodiment of the tensions concerning the American creed, the sanctity of both the individual and the community. Presley's musical and cultural importance was situated between his subversive instincts to escape the limitations of the southern community via the blues, and his other side, the conservative one, which was rooted in his attraction to country music, family, and southern norms.

In this chapter I would like to return to the research of mythology, however, as I mentioned above, to do so from a psychological view, as well as musical and historical observations. I will concentrate on the Jungian analytical psychological theory concerning the positive sides of the shadow and the great mother archetypes, and the creative side of the "son-lover" complex at its center. In this essay, I will return to Presley's music from the early Sun era recordings, until his transformation to a superstar through the RCA conglomerate. In other words, I'll add psychological context to Presley's discourse, and concentrate on the projection of his relationships with his parents (especially with his mother) on his music and personality, in addition to other historical and musical factors. But first, I would like to locate Presley in the historical and musical context.

### ***Presley, Post-War Youth Culture and Rock 'n' Roll Music***

"Rock and roll is the most brutal, ugly, degenerate, vicious form of expression-sly," declared the singer Frank Sinatra, while expressing his anxiety regarding what he perceived as rock 'n' roll menace.<sup>7</sup> Relating at least to his career sensibilities, Sinatra's concerns were not out of place. Since the mid-1950s, a group of southern performers began to change the musical landscape: Elvis Presley performed "Hound Dog" while swinging his hips on various TV programs; Little Richard screamed "Wop Bop A Loo Bop A Lop Bam Boom!" all the way to the top-20 of the billboard charts; Jerry Lee Lewis justified the nickname "the killer" with his outrageous performance of "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On", while Check Berry presented lyrical originality and a very influential rock 'n' roll riff in "Johnny B. Goode".

The mid-1950s rock 'n' roll era lasted hardly a turbulent half a decade, during which American popular music underwent a fundamental change. The noise – of the music, the preachers, the church, the establishment, the administrations of the states, and the artists of previous generations – has fueled the controversy that rock 'n' roll has brought on.<sup>8</sup> The discourse was relating to sexual and cultural norms, and order of everyday life. The feeling among large sections of at least conservative "white" America was that something, someone, was shaking its cultural boat. Indeed, the rock 'n' roll era brought with it spectacular performers. They were energetic, exciting, scandalous, and noisy. The rock 'n' roll of the 1950s contained the same elements of its musical roots, the blues and country music: the use of the 12 bar blues, electric guitars as the basis for its sound, and increased use of pentatonic, blues scales and modal

---

<sup>6</sup>Marcus, Greil, 1975, *Mystery Train*, New York: Plume; 5th ed.

<sup>7</sup>Altschuler, G., Glenn, 2003, *All Shook Up: How Rock 'N' Roll Changed America*, New York, p. 6; Dundy, Elaine, *Elvis and Gladys (Southern Icons)*, Loc. 4603-4604.

<sup>8</sup>Altschuler, G., Glenn, *All Shook Up*, p. 6.

melodies. Compared with the richness of harmony of classical music and jazz, Broadway and even Tin Pan Alley, musically rock 'n'roll was very limited. Still, it had made a huge contribution to the development of popular music.

Even if rock 'n' roll seemed to reach the general public in the course of 1955, it was preceded by years of incubation on the margins of the American music world, under the catalog of race music.<sup>9</sup> At the end of the 1940s, the term "race music" was replaced with rhythm and blues.<sup>10</sup> Since the early 1950s, Cleveland-based American broadcaster Alan Fried has dubbed R&B as "rock 'n' roll," a black dialect of sexual act, and the name has remained since.

The major record companies preferred to concentrate on the more refined songs of the Tin Pan Alley and their "respectable" performers. In contrast to the popular charm of the big-bands of the swing era, or the avant-garde sensibilities of the bebop, the rhythm and blues was considered as an inferior cultural expression and, in a sense, a pornographic obscenity.<sup>11</sup>

Rock 'n' roll broke into American public consciousness in 1955, and the appearance of the music was related to the history of the American media: the historical struggles between the American radio and the ASCAP, and the strengthening of the rival BMI organization with a catalog of southern and racial music; through the development of the transistor, to the regional radio stations and the 45-round format.<sup>12</sup>

The major breakthrough of rock 'n' roll music to public awareness occurred in Hollywood. The event was the song "Rock Around the Clock" sung by a white singer, Bill Haley. It served as a soundtrack for the successful film *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), and became the symbol of the period because of the social teenage delinquent connotations that accompanied the film. However, rock 'n' roll was not a product of one hit, but rather grew in diverse and original ways throughout America. Rock historian Charlie Gillette described various locations where rock 'n' roll was established, and Memphis and the label Sun Records were very important elements in the process.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the varied origins of rock 'n' roll, its core was in the south. With the exception of Chuck Berry, the pioneers of rock 'n' roll shared a similar sociological association of southern working class. Almost a century after the Civil War, the south lagged behind – both economically and culturally – in comparison to the north. But the Deep South – the place where Afro-Americans were still considered second-class citizens – was highly aware of two cultures: the first was the church; the second was music.

The southern boys, who were educated in religious communities, may have felt guilty about their love for the "forbidden culture", but were nonetheless attracted to rock 'n' roll. Lawrence Grossberg explained that what really distinguishes rock 'n' roll from its musical fathers was the

---

<sup>9</sup>Gillet, Charlie, Marcus, Greil, Halberstam, David, Palmer, Robert, , 2008, *Rock N' Roll 39'-59'*, New York: Steidl& Partners. Music historians have identified early rock 'n' roll songs since 1939, and even 1936, as boogie-woogie songs and blues by ensembles and artists who were alternative to the aesthetics of the swing Big Bands.

<sup>10</sup> Wexler, Jerry, and Ritz, David, 1993, *Rhythm and the Blues: A life in American Music*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, pp. 62-63.

<sup>11</sup> Cohn, Nik. *AwopbopaloobopAlopbamboom: The Golden Age of Rock*, Kindle edition, Grove/Atlantic, Inc., Loc. 219. The R&B songs' titles left no doubt about their contents: Billy Ward's "Sixty Minute Man", "Baby Let Bang Your Box" by The Toppers, and Hank Ballard's "Work with Me Annie" used black slang to introduce a crude sexual world.

<sup>12</sup> Peterson, Richard, 1990, "Why 1955? Explaining the Advent of Rock Music", *Popular Music* 9, pp. 99-116.

<sup>13</sup> Gillet, Charlie, *Sound Of The City: The Rise Of Rock And Roll*, London: Da Capo Press, p. 23.

fact that it had a sense of escape, which was expressed through the image of youth culture and life experience in the new, affluent society. He argued that America, the post-war empire, was rhetorically presented to youth as the best of all worlds. Yet, large sections of the Baby Boomers were becoming dissatisfied with the dissonance between the rhetoric and image of the American exceptionalism, and the terror of technocracy and the Cold War menace.<sup>14</sup> Culturally, these sections of the Baby Boomers were longing to break the prison of the new post-war everyday life routines; they were searching to differentiate themselves from the hegemonic culture; and most importantly, they were seeking new authenticity as adolescents, trying to affirm their own identity, in an age of massive changes. Rock 'n' roll became their culture.

Rock 'n' roll artists, especially the Caucasians who grew up in the southern community, were subject to the rural values, the religious morality, and the brutal values of racism in the south, but they also tried to break the suffocating framework of their community by using blues and others sides of African-American culture. We may add that these artists were drawn to the rebellious sexuality of black culture, but also felt guilty about their attraction to this "devil music", and expressed this schizophrenic pattern in the hybridization of violence, blatant sexuality, noise, and semi-anarchy into popular music.<sup>15</sup>

In the south, where the segregation policy was still in full force, Memphis, for once, was one of the main centers in the south where the white protestant culture and the African-American culture could connect. Beale Street offered leisure attractions to the white fundamentalist community: gambling houses, brothels, and a decadent world that answered a moral void. On the other hand, according to Craig Werner, black artists were fascinated with this place because they could profit from "the desire of the white man to walk on the wild side."<sup>16</sup>

### ***The Familial Roots of Elvis Presley***

Elvis came from a mixed familial background, including a French-Norman and Scottish-Irish blood with Indian and Jewish strains.<sup>17</sup> His religious upbringing and his southern poor white economic status had influenced him profoundly.<sup>18</sup>

He was born in Tupelo, apparently one of the last battlefields of the Civil War. It seems that the city hasn't been developed properly since the Reconstruction era. Elvis' mother, Gladys Love Smith, was one of four girls in a row born to a family of farmers and agriculturists with a physically disabled mother. The daughters would work in the fields along with the men, but the work had its gender limitations. Gladys was chubby and sweet (according the community witnesses), although the difficulties of life traumatized her nature and personality. "Inside, Gladys was very highly strung, very nervous, very scary," mentioned her biographer Elaine Dundy, "she was frightened by all kinds of things – by thunderstorms and wind. She was always hearing noises outside at night and imagining there was someone in the bushes."<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup>Grossberg, Lawrence, 1984, "Another Boring Day in Paradise: Rock and Roll and the Empowerment of everyday life", *Popular Music* 4, New York, pp. 225-258; Grossberg, Lawrence, 1992, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*, New York: Popular Conservatism and Post Modern Culture: Routledge.

<sup>15</sup>Marcus, Greil, *Mystery Train*.

<sup>16</sup> Werner, Craig, 2002, *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race and the Soul of America*, Edinbrugh: Canongate Books, pp. 66-67, p. 61.

<sup>17</sup> Dundy, Elaine, *Elvis and Gladys (Southern Icons)*, Loc. 219-222.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., Loc. 421.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., Loc. 559-560.

Despite her insecurity, she was friendly like her father, and stubborn in a unique way. The Big Depression of the late 1920s hit Gladys' family hard.<sup>20</sup> Yet, she loved dancing and music, and discovered country (hillbilly) music. The main social center of her community was the Church of God, where she had attended from childhood to adolescence. The Church of God was, according to Dundy, a "charismatic fundamentalist sect". They insisted on the reality of the supernatural, and particularly of the Holy Spirit, on which they placed their main emphasis. It is not a God-fearing church, but a God-loving agenda.

Elvis' father, Vernon, in a paradoxical way, also contributed to Presley's sense of identity. He had no purpose, no ambition whatsoever, and he never fully developed a professional skill. Vernon feared his angry and drunken father. Yet, he was "extremely handsome, pleasant, polite, easygoing and happy-go-lucky." It was evident that "he genuinely loved his wife [...] and [...] worshipped his baby child."<sup>21</sup>

Elvis Presley had a twin brother, Jesse, who died at his infancy, and it probably affected his sense of luck. The rumor was that in his youth he signed his name Elvis aron Presley (with a small "a") as a courtesy to his brother. He probably felt guilt, as well as a sense of providence and of uniqueness.

Elvis was fascinated with comic books about superheroes. "I was the hero of every comic book I ever read," he said in the 1970s. He was attracted to supernatural strength and powers, as well as the superheroes' double identities.<sup>22</sup> Superman and Batman were highly influential, but Presley was almost obsessed with the Captain Marvel series.

His Father's failures were evident in the public image as "long hungry", which "meant that you were capable of taking the food out of your own family's mouths in order to gorge yourself."<sup>23</sup> Dundy relates this issue to the fact that Presley was considered a poor eater – skinny and meager.

As a consequence of his parents' difficulties, Elvis exchange roles and became sort of a parent figure, especially to his suffering mother. His narcissistic wound led perhaps to the urge to save his family, a will that was rejuvenated by his twin syndrome, meaning that the more powerful member of the family must take care of the powerless. So, his parents became "his children".

Unintentionally, he was actually trained and coached by his mother to be a performer. Unlike her husband, she insisted that he would have the education neither she nor her husband had obtained. In fact, Elvis gained a respectable musical education both in church and school, and singing was an amateur family tradition. Films were also a great source of inspiration for him, especially the musicals and the dancing of Fred Astaire.

During his final year at school, Presley has already become a regular singer in various musical frameworks. It was also the time that his mother, Gladys, has become more emotionally sensitive. He would have found her in erratically changing moods – moving from radical joy to extreme agony, from immature fantasies about having a pink Cadillac (which, like a parent to his kid, he promised to buy her) to tearful longing to their state of relationship at his childhood. This

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., Loc. 206-207.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., Loc. 1045-1048.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., Loc. 1187-1189.

unstable condition of his beloved mother would affect him, at least his own maturity as a performer.

At the age of eighteen, he was almost ready for a singing career. What he needed is a mentor. Sam Phillips, the founder of Sun Records, would gain that role, and his contribution would be widely discussed and celebrated.<sup>24</sup> However, I argue that the reasons Elvis Presley documented and recorded such mature and sophisticated performances during the Sun Recording era and in his early RCA hits, at such an early age, are also rooted in the ways he unconsciously related to his psychological shadow and his family complex. In order to relate to that, first I would like to explain the Sun Records racial fusion.

### ***Good Rockin' Tonight: Elvis' Fusion***

As he approached the recordings at the Sun Studio, Elvis Presley was only a few months after his high school graduation. In fact, he went to Sun Studio for the first time (1953) to record two songs for his mother, as well as to test his abilities. Like other musical icons that rocked the last century, Presley needed a father figure. Sam Phillips, the owner of Sun Studio, was a producer (a pioneering and new role at the time) and engineer, who had experienced with recordings of leading blues artists who wandered between Chicago and the Mississippi. Marcus mentioned that Phillips knew that black music marketing possibilities for the white audience were very limited.<sup>25</sup> He also wanted to refresh hillbilly music, since he believed it reflected perfectly the fatalism of his fans with the bitter reality. So he was looking for a white man who could sing like a black one. Presley, as it turned out, was perfect for the role.

The connection was not immediate. Presley was accompanied by a country guitarist (Scotty Moore) and contrabass player (Bill Black), with whom he tried several pieces. Finally, they found their sound with a performance of "That's All Right" – a song by the African-American blues singer Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup. Presley performed as he combined various American traditions together – country, blues, gospel, the spirituals – all of which he sang naturally. But he did much more than that: Presley added to this mixture sexual emotion, and later – physicality. In fact, he would become the most white sexual stage singer seen until that time. He had gone much further than Sinatra, who, compared to Presley, seemed polite.

Presley's voice was accompanied by a brief slapback-delay that was created by Philips' pioneering technological trick, which eventually became the hallmark of the rock 'n' roll sound of the 1950s in general.

Presley's biographer, Peter Guralnik, explained that the result sounded easy, effortless, happy, and spontaneous, and the sound was spreading with innocence and purity.<sup>26</sup>

Rock historian Nik Cohn wrote:

His voice sounded edgy, nervous, and it cut like a scythe, it exploded all over the place. It was anguished, immature, raw. But, above all, it was the sexiest thing that anyone had ever heard.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup>Marcus, Greil, *Mystery Train*.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>26</sup>Guralnik, Peter, 1992, "Elvis Presley", in *The Rolling Stone's illustrated history of Rock and Roll*, (Eds.) De Curtis Anthony, and Henke James, New York, p. 28.

Greil Marcus, who believed that Presley's genius was unprecedented in American vocalization, added:

This is emotionally complex music that can return something new each time you listen to it. What I hear, most of the time, is the affection and respect Elvis felt for the limits of conventions of his family life, of his community, and ultimately of American life, captured in his country sides, and his refusal to those limits, played out in the blues. This is the rhythm of acceptance and rebellion, lust and quietude, triviality and distinction.<sup>28</sup>

Beside the superlatives, Presley's recordings actually presented a unique fusion of country and blues traditions. They weren't pure country, since they lacked the fiddle and pedal-steel, and the rhythm was more emphasized. They weren't either like any kind of pure blues, either, since they lacked the Chicago or Memphis blues guitar licks.<sup>29</sup>

Joel Williamson, in his book about Presley and the American south, believed that the performance and recording of "That's All Right" was an appropriation from another culture, and it was a new mutation with a message. It was, he believed, about his parents, Vernon and Gladys, his twin brother, Jessie, and his girlfriend, Dixie.<sup>30</sup>

After "That's All Right" became a regional hit, Presley and Phillips continued enthusiastically: The B-side of the single, "Blue Moon of Kentucky", originally a country song by Bill Monroe, was transformed into a combination of R&B and country, while Scotty Moore's guitar painted it with licks and arpeggios from the repertoire of country music. Presley and his band stormed on with "Good Rockin' Tonight" (1954), a sexual R&B with country licks and arpeggios, which was originally written and recorded by the African-American singer Roy Brown in 1947. All these were woven into perfection in "Mystery Train" (1955), originally written as a blues song by the Afro-American Junior Parker.

### ***The Therapeutic White Shadow and Race Hybridism***

In order to understand the emotional impact Presley's early Sun recordings, I would like to use Jungian psychology concerning the shadow and the great mother archetypes. As I explained in the Pink Floyd essay,<sup>31</sup> the shadow represents what the subject refuses to accept, but still forces it on the subject, either directly or indirectly. The shadow represents feelings of inferiority.<sup>32</sup> The human shadow could be perceived as the foundation for evil and hidden moralistic tendencies, but also for positive traits. The shadow is the primitive side of the psyche, the shadow of the unconscious, the inferior motives, fantasy of infantilism and animosity, and perhaps everything a subject hides within itself. It is connected to our sexuality, aggressions, urges of greed, jealousy,

---

<sup>27</sup>Cohn, Nik, *AwopbopaloobopAlopbamboom*, p. 24; *Ibid.*, Loc. 367-371.

<sup>28</sup>Marcus, Greil, *Mystery Train*, p. 147.

<sup>29</sup>Palmer, Robert, 1982, *Deep Blues: A Musical and Cultural History, From the Mississippi Delta to Chicago South Side to The World*, New York: Penguin Books.

<sup>30</sup>Williamson, Joel, *Elvis Presley: A Southern Life*, Kindle edition, Oxford University Press, p. 152.

<sup>31</sup>Katorza, Ari, December, 2017, "Lead Role in a Cage: The Shadow, the Anima, the PuerAeternus Archetype and the myth of Syd Barrett in The Dark Side of the Moon (1973)", *Harvest Journal*.

<sup>32</sup>Dehing, Jef, "Jung's Shadow", 2002, [www.cgjung-vereniging.nl/home/files/jef\\_dehing.pdf](http://www.cgjung-vereniging.nl/home/files/jef_dehing.pdf)



narcissism, arrogance, sanctimonious, and racism. Yet, it is also connected to characters that are considered foreigner to a society where a person grew up.<sup>33</sup>

Presley was hardly the first white performer to fuse African-American music with Caucasian and other minorities' traditions. In fact, this process was part of the American traditions of minstrelsy since the 1830s.<sup>34</sup> At the beginning of the twentieth century, Al Jolson reached showbiz greatness with blackface minstrelsy, while borrowing African-American mimics, slang and rhythm; Irving Berlin used African-American ragtime groove and minstrelsy mythology to create his mega hit "Alexander's Ragtime Band" as a pre-World War I sensation. I argue that through the evolution of American popular music, the performers, composers, and writers shocked and attracted America at the same time with the blending of different race materials.<sup>35</sup> Presley's fusion was already a "natural" tradition, and yet it steered a national cultural panic.

Post-Structural and post-Colonial scholars tended to relate to juxtaposition of race cultures as an exploitation of the disadvantaged classes.<sup>36</sup> However, I prefer to diagnose the connection between the subject and popular culture as a positive act. We need culture to overcome chronic pessimism that is embedded in everyday life. Based on the Jungian theory, I would even add that our mental energies work quite different from what post-colonial scholars usually suggest.

The fusion Presley presented in his early Sun recordings and the sensation it produced suggests that his black rhythm, vocal, language, and image had therapeutic power. Psychologically, the Sun recordings (and later his early RCA singles) confronted masses of Americans with their personal and collective shadow. Presley's country-blues mask enabled them to deal with a variety of aspects in their encounter with the "other": traces of feelings of inferiority, the primeval sides of the psych, their strange and awkward adjustment difficulties. Presley's black-white musical mask, forced Americans to deal with the primitive and dark side of their unconscious and resentment, which they repressed and concealed within themselves. It is nonetheless symbolic that the voice of the therapeutic shadow (Presley) was released by the Sun label – since, of course, the sun is the opposite of a shadow.

### ***Elvis Presley and the Mother Complex***

The projection of the shadow is the first step to comprehend Presley's impact. However, I believe that in order to understand Elvis Presley's music, we have to analyze his familial

---

<sup>33</sup> Bauman, Avi, "The Shadow, the Evil and their Importance to Consciousness and Mental Development", 2012, [www.jung-israel.org/apage/113030.php](http://www.jung-israel.org/apage/113030.php)

<sup>34</sup> Lhamon Jr., W. T., 1998, *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip-Hop*, London: Harvard University Press; Lott, Eric, 1993, *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press; Saxton, Alexander, 1990, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth Century America*, New York: Verso; Roediger R. David, 1991, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, New York: Verso.

<sup>35</sup> Concerning race materials hybridization by composers and lyricists, we may use as an example the case of Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II, who turned European music, Minstrelsy and African-American spirituals into a new model for musical in *Showboat* (1927); George Gershwin also used the same ingredients of European high art and Afro-American popular culture for a new form of his Jazz Opera, *Porgy and Bess*.

<sup>36</sup> Melnick, Jeffrey, 1999, *A Right to Sing The Blues: African American, Jews and American Popular Song*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.; Rogin, Michael, 1998, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot*, Berkeley: University of California press; Sacks, B. Karen, 1999, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America*, New York: Rutgers University Press.

relationships, especially his bond with his mother. There lies at least a part of the answer, a way to grasp the magic of a grown-up-childlike character, a prince, and perhaps a modern Orpheus.

In various psychoanalytic theories there is a gap in relation to the mother character, explains the Jungian scholar Avi Bauman.<sup>37</sup> Most theories emphasize the importance of the mother's character in the child's development, and give a minimal reference to the mother herself and to the dynamics among her many forces. Those theories see the child as a developing infant and the mother as mature.

Jung argued that a mother intensifies and activates the maternal archaic images and experiences in her soul, though her family members influence her complexes and her adaptation of the archaic images. Jung believed that the mother figure was a key to the door of the unconscious, meaning, understanding and accepting ourselves and our development.<sup>38</sup> The psychological case of Presley reminds us that the mother's harsh and cruel opposition, when it came to giving up her children as providers of her needs, is especially evident in many ancient myths. In this type of relationship, there is no possibility of separate growth; there is no release from her image, and often these mothers turn their male child into a kind of a "son-lover".

Mythological stories, continues Bauman, which end in the failure of good motherhood and the victory of its dark side, present the death of the sons and their supernatural transformation into beautiful and spectacular – flowers like violet, anemone, and narcissus.<sup>39</sup> Unlike heroes, sons-lovers would have failed in their mission and remained stuck in their mothers' hegemony without being able to live real, positive lives.

The mother remains a divine representation with supernatural powers (sometime erotic and lustful). She might feel the baby as an urge originated in Eros who saves her from her death wishes. By its beauty, vitality and hope, the baby evokes in his mother, along with the maternal feelings, the love instinct – the Eros, meaning that the mother is in love with her baby. This psychological side of Presley is similar to the Greek myth of the "son-lover" Adonis and his mother. This was described as the following:

*The beautiful Myrrhawas the king's daughter. She was portrayed as possessing such gorgeous beauty that the goddess Aphrodite decided to punish her and her father, the king. She made Myrrha fall in love with her father, and secretly consummate that love when her father was drunk. Later on, in anger and guilt, the king drove his poor pregnant daughter out his house. Aphrodite finally transformed the wandering Myrrha into a myrrh tree the moment she gave birth. From the trunk of this special, fragrant tree, a beautiful infant was born – Adonis.*

*The baby Adonis was adopted with warmth and great desire by Aphrodite herself. However, because of her other activities, the goddess had to find a substitute mother – Persephone, queen of the underworld. Persephone, the dark goddess, fell in love with Adonis, and the goddess-mothers fought over the beautiful infant and turned to Zeus. Zeus decided that the mothers must divide the beautiful child according to the seasons, until he grew up and could also receive a third of the seasons for himself alone.*

---

<sup>37</sup> Bauman, Avi, 2009, "The Hidden Negatives of the Mother Figure", in: *Mothers: a Look at Psychoanalysis and Elsewhere*, (Ed.) Emilia Pironi, Jerusalem: Van Leer and KibuzMeuhad, pp. 54-90.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

*The charming boy, who became a beautiful lad, was nurtured by Aphrodite, who made him her consort and lover. The lover-lad gave up his own season, the third that was meant for him, when he grew up. He was led to belong entirely to his "current" and new mother, Aphrodite. However, the jealous Persephone insisted that the boy also belonged to the kingdom of death.<sup>40</sup> She roused the envy of Ares, the god of war and Aphrodite's consort, and he, in his anger, sent a wild boar that killed the youthful Adonis. Anemones grew from Adonis' blood. Although Adonis descended to the underworld, according to Aphrodite's wish, he returns every half year, with the arrival of spring, helps the flowers bloom, and then he goes back to the underworld for the winter. Adonis became the god of women, the god whose rites scattered the fragrance of the myrrh tree, which symbolizes his mother.<sup>41</sup>*

According to this myth and to Presley's psychological background, a "son-lover" evokes strong feelings and urges, and the possible and hidden aspects might be the mother's temptations, as eroticization serves as a major compensation in her life. The image of the seductive mother, who experienced erotic life through her child, appears as an exceptional case, but Bauman argues that if we extend the concept of engagement to the impulse of life in general, this aspect will change its meaning. The baby's image as a living and loving being, and as the subject of her love addiction is self-evident, but if the mother's needs for love are too great to bear – whether because of her past relationships or her relationship with her husband – her child's role would become even more important as a compensator.<sup>42</sup>

Elvis' mother, Gladys, turned her son into a "son-lover", but this role, which is always a dangerous one, was even more problematic during the rise of stardom. At the beginning success seemed enjoyable, but very soon it became terrifying for his mother. Her religious background had an effect on her depression, because her son was accused of playing the "devil's music". Historian Glen Altschuler argued that the establishment in many states around the US tried to censor rock 'n' roll shows, and Dundy mentioned that preachers urged their communities to pray for Elvis' soul.<sup>43</sup> "After Elvis became famous," confessed one friend of the family, "Gladys was never happy another day. Only when he'd come back, the little he could, to be with her in Memphis, then she'd be all right."<sup>44</sup>

While Elvis was considered by his fans as a youth martyr, his mother saw him as an exhausted refugee that must defend himself from his female fans and their boyfriends. Elaine Dundy describes the mother and son's relationship:

He [Elvis] was supposed to phone last night and he didn't. I know something bad's happened to him: And she'd be sure he'd been killed. You just couldn't get her to see it didn't make sense. 'She was getting real sick. She was drinking a lot [... ] It made Elvis very unhappy to see how unhappy she was. He was very considerate of her. He didn't fly because she was afraid of airplanes. And whenever he rode that motorcycle of his, he never revved it up until he was out of her hearing.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. The description Adonis' myth is based on Bauman's essay.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Altschuler, G., Glenn, *All Shook Up*, p. 6; Dundy, Elaine, *Elvis and Gladys (Southern Icons)*, Loc. 3833-3838.

<sup>44</sup> Dundy, Elaine, *Elvis and Gladys (Southern Icons)*, Loc. 3769-3770.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., Loc. 4577-4579.

This state of mother-"son-lover" relationship is usually a dangerous one, since the worship of beauty can't replace the mothers' components. In addition, the split between the Eros and the Thanatos (death), both of which exist in such mothers, is a precarious condition to relationships between mother and her son.

Young Elvis was the "son-lover" who came to the world as if to support and give his mother a life and an Eros. The "son-lover" would give his mother the Eros and come to cure her from anxiety and depression, while sometimes paying a horrible price: self-relinquishment and inability to take care of himself and his own health. The creative and positive side of the "son-lover", like in Presley's case, could evolve into great expertise to evoke erotic Eros, passion, and body movements. This energy, as expressed by Presley, would finally magnate the globe.

### ***Rock 'n' Roll of the Great Mother***

Jung argues that for every destructive force, like the dark mother, there is a positive one, a creative force.<sup>46</sup> While Elvis and his mother's psychological condition was not a healthy one, it also had constructive artistic sides, since the great mother archetype symbolizes creativity, birth, fertility, sexual union, and nurturing. She is a creative force not only for life, but also for art and ideas.

Symbols of the mother may appear in things representing the goal of our longing for redemption, such as Paradise, the Kingdom of God. Jung mentions that Church, university, city or country, Heaven, Earth, the woods, the sea or any still waters, the underworld and the moon, all of those can be mother-symbols.

Jung argues that a man with a mother complex may have a differentiated Eros (instead of, or in addition to, homosexuality). This could give him wide social capabilities, aesthetic sensitivities, and positive sides of femininity. Jung connects these characters to a true sense of "feeling for history, and to be conservative in the best sense and cherish the values of the past." This character may have strong "religious feelings [...] and good at a spiritual receptivity which makes him responsive to revelation."<sup>47</sup>

The mother complex may appear, like in Presley's case, in Don Juanism.<sup>48</sup> It has both a dark side and a positive one. The latter may appear in a person as a positive force with highly ambitious goals. This energy, like in Presley's case, may oppose narrow-mindedness, injustice, racism, and the person would be pro-sacrifices for what he considers to be right. Like in Presley's case, "sometimes bordering on heroism; perseverance, inflexibility and toughness of will; a curiosity that does not shrink even from the riddles of the universe; and finally, a revolutionary spirit which strives to put a new face upon the world."<sup>49</sup>

Looking back and listening to the Sun recordings, it is almost impossible not to feel what Marcus described as a "rhythm of acceptance and rebellion, lust and quietude, triviality and distinction."<sup>50</sup> The songs and the superb recordings for the standards of that era are saturated

---

<sup>46</sup> Jung, Carl Gustav, *Four Archetypes*, London & New York: Routledge, 2002, pp. 13-49.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Nash, Alanna, 2010, *Baby, Let's Play House: Elvis Presley and the Women Who Loved Him*, New York: It Books.

<sup>49</sup> Jung, Carl Gustav, *Four Archetypes*, pp. 13-49.

<sup>50</sup> Marcus, Greil, *Mystery Train*, p. 147.

with the mother archetype symbols: "That's All Right" was dealing with parents who approve of their son's girlfriend. "Blue Moon of Kentucky" was about security and hope, in which the land (Kentucky) and the moon are both great mother archetype symbols. "Good Rockin' Tonight" was about a young teenager that breaks free from parental control and enters a sexual, grown-up world. "Mystery Train" was clearly about the runaway girl and the longing for safety of relationship and home, another mother symbol. "I Don't Care If the Sun Don't Shine" is a country song about safety and a steady relationship, while, again, the mother, Earth, and hazards are balanced by love and domesticity. "Baby Let's Play House", another R&B and country fusion with the addition of drums, was a major Sun single that reached the top-5 of the country billboard. It was strictly about domesticity, but a non-conformist type of domesticity back then, since "Let's play House" could refer to a couple sharing life and sexual relationship without being married. "I'm Left, You're Right, She's Gone" was, once again, about the abandoned young man that would have to face the consequences of the breakup. Presley also recorded "Blue Moon", Rodgers and Hart's masterpiece, which in this case may be interpreted a bit differently – strictly about his mother; after all, it is based on one of the important mother symbols: the moon. Lorenz Hart's homosexuality and love-relationship difficulties are being transformed to Presley's isolation and longing for domesticity on his rise to stardom, while maybe, unconsciously, he was trying to comfort his mother.<sup>51</sup>

At the end of 1955, Presley signed with the RCA conglomerate, but even though he had to change his studio and producer, his early RCA recordings continued to share much of the characteristics of his Sun singles. Presley continued to record with his Memphis-based band, demanded for similar reverberation (in this case, probably a fusion of the echo chamber and a tape-delay), and unconsciously continued with songs that were rounded with the great mother's symbols. "Heartbreak Hotel" (1956) is, perhaps, the most obvious one (the symbol of the Heartbreak Hotel as a comforting great mother), but also "I'm Counting On You" (1956). The timeline concerning Presley's RCA recording suggests that it has become much more commercial (on September 2nd, 1956, he recorded more than half a dozen songs in a single day), even though some great classics would be still documented, such as "All Shook Up" (1956) and "Don't Be Cruel" (1956).

Commercially, Presley's most important single was "Hound Dog" (1956). Originally it was written by the American Jews Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller, for the Afro-American female singer, Big Mama Thornton. Lieber and Stoller used a southern black slang to refer to Don Juanism, but Presley changed parts of the lyrics and made it vaguer. Lieber remembered that he "didn't like the way he [Elvis] did it. Somebody changed the lyrics [...]"<sup>52</sup>

In spite of that, America was quite shook up when it was confronted with this song. The track remained authentic in its very sexual feeling: with handclaps, a faster groove, an astonishing vocal performance, and commercial appeal that was projected through various TV performances; it established the Elvis-Mania, in a similar way to how "She Loves You" by the Beatles presented Beatlemania to the UK in 1963. It turned out that Elvis' mother complex, unconsciously or consciously, was represented in his real Don Juanism, and helped turn the song into a world sensation.

---

<sup>51</sup>Furia, Philip, *The Poets of Tin Pan Alley: A History of America's Great Lyricists*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

<sup>52</sup>Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller with David Ritz, *Hound Dog: The Lieber & Stoller Autobiography*, Kindle edition, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2009, Loc. 1221-1235.

### *Epilogue*

In this chapter, my aim was to shed a light on hidden sides of Elvis Presley's music. Most of the good writings concerning Presley dealt with the orthodox explanations about race, cultural fusion, youth culture sensibilities, and the southern aspects. All these are indeed crucial to the understanding of his cultural impact. However, my aim was to focus on the psychological side of Presley's upbringing and family ties, in order to add my contribution to the discourse.

The therapeutic shadow, the great mother archetype and the mother complex were my focus points. I wanted to understand the racial and cultural hybridization in a more psychological spectrum, and to comprehend the deep heritage of Presley's Sun Recordings as part of the positive and creative sides of his mothercomplex.

It is still very intriguing that Presley's artistic decline began not just with his army service, the horrific management of Colonel Tom Parker in the 1960s, and Hollywood's soul-raping myth, but immediately after the death of his young mother, Gladys, in 1958. The "son-lover" may have a spoiled prince persona, just like Presley, but with the addition of lack of a strong father role model, Presley was doomed to be exploited by other "fake fathers", such as Parker, Hollywood moguls, and show business in general, until his tragic and pitiful death in 1977.

At his best, the energies of the "son-lover" were so strong that they were able to turn the music industry up-side-down. Scholars, as I mentioned above, have already mentioned that rock 'n' roll has become political "behind his back", for the attacks it attracted rather than for any political agenda. The establishments in the federation states, Washington DC, and the southern church, made efforts to censor the music, like they did with ragtime and early jazz before it, but with a greater sense of panic. These attacks, in a very paradoxical sense, defined rock 'n' roll as a subversive cultural force.

During the second half of the 1950s, the rise of Presley's and other rock 'n' roll talents from the south changed the landscape of the top-20 billboard charts. Of course, it was not only music, but also a historical process of change concerning sexuality, youth power, consumption, and no less important – the beginning of the end of the southern apartheid. The mother and her "son-lover" were the source of at least some of the energies of this very influential process, first in America, and later on in the global culture.