

**SOME THOUGHTS ON THE
SYMBOLISM OF BULLFIGHTS**

Enrique Guarnier

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To date few articles have been published about possible interpretations of the symbolism of bullfights from the psychoanalytic point of view.

William H. Desmond³ emphasized the idea of parricide in the quasireligious ritual that takes place during a bullfight. The bull lives ambiguously both as God and as Man. The matador, in turn, represents the leader of the primitive horde who sacrifices the father to be devoured. This ritual can be traced back to the ancient civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, Crete and Greece.

In a later article, W. Hunt¹⁰ tried to develop some aspects of this theme, although he was unable to explain why this rite occurred only in Spanish-speaking countries.

Martin Grotjahn⁸ conceived of the bullfight as a symbolization of a Christian festival, almost a modern Passion Play. The bullfighter represents and acts as the seductor of the aggressor. In the end, the perfection of the tragedy, the unity between the attacker and defender, between father and mother, parent and child is re-established. Bull and bullfighter become one in a ballet-like dance.

John Ingham,¹¹ in an extremely original article, bases the existence of bullfighting in the Hispanic world on race and family structure. The father is a man who usually abandons the mother, or who remains absent from his home; thus, the development of a bullfight would agree with a negative Oedipus situation. The bull then would be the aggressive, masculine element, with phallic attributes. The bullfighter would represent the feminine element, as his clothes (light colors, stockings, ballet slippers), as well as his poses befit a woman rather than a man.

We should add here Ernest Jones¹² ideas, according to which priests use effeminate clothing, which is equivalent to a symbolic castration. Upon giving up some elements of virility, the clergy gains feminine prerogatives, acquiring the advantage of belonging to both sexes.

We might also mention the similarity between the female scorpion, which kills the destructive male, and the bullfighter who dances around the bull until he exterminates him.

This article will try to bring some other ideas to this theme, complementing the aforementioned ones.

A bullfight takes on the aspect of a pagan rite, developing in the same way, with its slightest motives regulated in a compulsive manner. It has its priests, nearly always three (the Oedipus relationship), who fight six bulls. The first bull will be killed by the most experienced fighter, the one who has his title longest—except in the case where the son acquires this privilege of fighting the first bull, which is yielded to him during a ceremony by the oldest one (the father).

It is also significant to remember the rite of a bullfighter's farewell during which his "*coleta*"* (a shock of hair attached to the occiput) is cut off in front of the public. This castration ceremony is reminiscent of the Samson myth about the loss of strength concentrated in one place.

The liturgy of a bullfight has its canon laws, and the violation of the established formalities is punished by a nearly implacable authority.

For the Hispanic world, the martyrdom of the bull is not suggestive of cruelty, as it is for the Anglo-Saxons, who imagine that there is a large element of sadism in the animal's torture. Bullfighting, rather, is considered as a ballet, or as the unfolding of an artistic activity.

The bullfighter uses his body as a means of expression. Narcissism and exhibitionism are easily detectable in the different stylized poses. In some of the irregular postures, such as biting the bull's horn, we can see expressions derived from oral requirement. The anal aspects are evident in the different back passes, which imply a contact with the matador's buttocks, while genitality is represented by the need of having the bull pass as close as possible in front of

* or "little tail."—Ed.

the genitals. Aggression is visible in the penetration of the bull with the sword.

The public attending a bullfight does not regard it as simple entertainment but, rather, participates in it as a collective person, like the chorus of a Greek tragedy. Their shouts of approval or disapproval are heard throughout the fight, accompanying every movement of the bullfighter.

The taurine drama consists of two essential elements: the bull emerges into the arena virgin, not knowing beforehand what will happen to him. (It is difficult to accept an animal over four years old.) His muscles are developed like those of an athlete, and he is ready when he reaches the ring.

The first incidents are deceitful, because he suffers no pain when he follows the capes that fool him. He is like the adolescent facing a world of lies. The moment of suffering begins with the arrival upon the scene of a new enemy, the "picador." The bull throws himself upon the horse, but fails to find the adversary who is entrenched above, and who can safely attack him with a lance. Pain fires his anger, and makes him attack ferociously.

The bull does not leave the combat unscathed, and, at the start of his depression, he is assaulted anew by the punishment of the "banderillas," which excite him without causing intense pain, much as "Christ is crowned with thorns."

The final act of the tragedy then begins. The sword is hidden under the red cloth, while bullfighter and bull embark upon a fight to the death to decide which one of them will fatally lose.

What, then, are the reasons for this destructive drama where only strength, deceit and death are seen?

For the Latin, the mystery resides in the idea of omnipotence. The bullfighter is but a man who can fall, wounded, in the arena. He must fight on the ground of an enemy six times larger, and still agile. It is only when he manages to dominate the animal, and strike him with the sword, that he becomes transfigured into an omnipotent being, a kind of superman, who shows his strength in the face of power.

CLINICAL EVIDENCE

Since I live in a bullfight-oriented country, I was given the opportunity to examine two cases of bullfighters, by means of which I

shall try to demonstrate the thesis I present in this article.

The first case is that of a frustrated bullfighter who underwent treatment because of a problem of genital impotence and troubles with various organs that had never been found to have a physiological basis.

The patient was in his late thirties. The father left home when the boy was twelve years old. He had devoted his life to politics, and was an unresponsive and unaffectionate man who had little contact with his son. Upon his death, there was no great sorrow on the part of the patient, who took the loss quite coldly.

The mother is described as an authoritative figure, but sentimental and ambitious at the same time. After her separation from the father, she was courted by several men. One of them, a well-known athlete, made an impact on the patient, causing him to idealize—up to a certain point—the masculine figure.

An older brother of the patient is a homosexual. He lives at home, but does not work. He wakes up late, and goes for walks. Once in a while he appears as an extra on television programs.

The economic position of the family has undergone a great many changes; right now it is quite comfortable, due to the fact that—through great efforts—the patient has acquired the auto-repair shop where he worked as a mechanic.

As far as his sexual history is concerned, it is interesting to point out that during puberty he indulged in actions that have homosexual implication, even though he did not go as far as masturbation. He had his first sexual contact with a prostitute at the age of fifteen, and these relations were occasionally repeated afterwards, followed by great fears. The sexual act is surrounded by a series of ceremonials by which he avoids almost any contact with the skin of the woman, and is followed by thorough and repeated washings of the genital organs.

When he was twenty-five he met a woman with whom he lived for some time, without achieving any deep emotional or sexual understanding.

I shall now discuss this patient's contact with bullfights, and his failure in this field.

At the beginning of his high-school career, he was taken by several school friends to see his first bullfight, which awakened his intense emotions due to the success of one of the bullfighters. Soon,

he skipped school to devote himself to this irresistible attraction, and—in spite of his mother's opposition—he began to wander through different city parks where he tried out the new "passes" he had learned.

During a morning amateur fight with yearling calves, held in benefit of a Spanish neighborhood baker, he fought for the first time, with great difficulties, as he was faced with an unresponding animal.

Nevertheless, urged on by some friends, he managed to appear in a village, and this second time he proved to be extremely skillful, eluding danger. He fought twice more afterwards, and all those around him predicted a brilliant future. According to the patient, this was one of the happiest moments of his life: "I felt the animal as a hated element that I had to dominate, and over which I must prove my power."

However, after an important success in a provincial bullring, he was given the opportunity to fight in the capital of the state. On attempting to kill one of his bulls, he was tossed and gored in the right thigh, with a resulting wound of 6 cm by 4 cm deep. A month later, having recovered, he made a comeback but he is fearful and resentful of the wound he suffered.

During the next fight, the public turned against him; he tried to stand still before a malicious animal, and was once more gored on the left side of the rectus.

His bullfighting career ended here, and he started to work in a machine shop where he achieved noticeable progress, some of which has been due to his two years of analysis. At the present time, his intense fear of castration has disappeared; he is married and has a newborn daughter.

The second case was only seen once. He was a well-known bullfighter, now retired and owner of a breeding ranch for brave bulls. His wife asked for an appointment because of her husband's intense preoccupation and fears related to the behavior of one of their sons. He behaved in a definitely feminine manner. The child refused to ride horses and took refuge in his mother's lap. He was frequently found playing with his sisters and was interested in feminine clothes instead of being physically aggressive towards his brothers.

I immediately suspected the bullfighter's own problem, and was able to prove that there was a projection in what was said. So that,

when I verbalized it, the wife herself realized that the fears were mostly unfounded, and we made an appointment for an interview with the father.

The bullfighter in question was famous for over twelve years, having been considered as one of the best matadors of his time.

His attitude during the session was rather defensive, and I was only able to obtain a few facts to explain his fears.

In contrast to so many other bullfighters, he came from a middle-class family and poverty was never a decisive factor in the selection of his profession.

His father was a well-known tailor; however, he was always discontent with the family earnings and centered his dreams on the gaming tables of Monte Carlo. He traveled there three times, with more or less the same result every time. He then directed his ambitions to oil wells, without solving in any way his economic longings.

The son—who grew to be a famous matador—became more and more attracted to bullfighting and, in his own words, “the wealth of color, the splendor and the excitement were elements engraved forever in his mind.”

By direct questioning, I was able to obtain information as to how he felt when he dressed as a torero; he believed it was ridiculous and anachronistic to don a strange suit, with white stockings and a lace shirt, to fight an animal weighing over 500 kilos.

He himself recognized the feminine element involved in some of his poses, and right after that, he briefly mentioned some homosexual experiences of his childhood.

When he was asked why he had chosen his profession, he hesitated for a few seconds, but went on to speak of his afternoons of glorious success; of the unforgettable, deafening ovations; and especially after the triumph, of the sensation of indescribable ecstasy.

Bullfighters show their original interpretation of the game. A good bullfighter has his own personal way of fighting. The style is the bullfighter. The most important thing, according to Belmonte, the great Spanish matador, “is that the intimate emotions of the bullfighter go beyond the fight itself.” Another bullfighter, El Gallo, felt “tears come to his eyes every time he made a pass.” Joselito spoke of spiritual fulfillment in this state of divine or diabolic possession, this drunkenness or enthusiasm found in bullfighting.” This emotion must not be confused with the fear produced by the mortal

risk of being caught by the bull. Dominguin, referring to fear, insisted that "if it does not disappear when the bull comes out, one cannot fight."

DISCUSSION

A strong omnipotence tendency, as well as a great capacity for sublimation, exists in the bullfighter. In his work on "Stages in the Development of the Sense of Reality," Ferenczi⁴ discovered that the phenomenon of omnipotence is a means used by the child to control objects. The primitive ego, in contrast to the differentiated ego, is considered weak or, rather, defenseless against its own instincts, as well as against the outside world.

Ferenczi⁴ first observed a limitless omnipotence, persisting as long as there was no concept of objects. This capacity becomes limited when impulses cannot be controlled. This takes place when movements are uncoordinated. However, when the child understands he can send signals that change a given situation, the "omnipotence of movements" emerges.

The negation of reality appears at the same time as the development of this feeling. P. Heiman⁹ asserted that "the child does not recognize the objects, since his capacity for perception develops gradually. However, the child partially denies, for psychological reasons, what he perceives through omnipotence and magic."

As to the phenomenon of sublimation, let us remember Freud's⁶ ideas in "The Ego and the Id," where he states that sublimation is the result of the objective libido's transformation into a narcissistic libido. The child's giving up of his own omnipotence makes him seek it in other objects and, through them, rejoin an omnipotent force in the outside world, either incorporating parts of this world into fantasy, or being incorporated by it (secondary narcissism).

Religious ecstasis, patriotism or bullfighting engender feelings of participation on the part of the ego in highly valued objects. The control of a destructive object, such as the bull, brings about an increase in self-esteem and, therefore, an omnipotent sensation.

We should also remark that the bull represents the male, or the father, and that the bullfighter, with traits of both sexes, dominates him. In Freud's work *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of*

His Childhood we read: "All the hermaphroditic gods' images could express the idea that divine perfection can only arise from the union of female and male."

To better understand the significance of modern bullfighting, it is necessary to say something about the conditions that determined the age old relationship between the Spaniard and the bull.

At the outset, I believe it should be said that the traditional idea of the bull's courage has been fostered by the strange tendency, or need, of Hispanic man to measure himself against it.

The bullfight was undoubtedly invented by hunters and sportsmen. Wherever, in the Ancient World, there has been fighting, bulls have been hunted. Forty centuries ago, it took place in Crete; afterwards in Greece, and, according to Pliny, later in the Rome of Julius Caesar.

Nobody is certain who taught the Spanish to adopt the sport. It may have come over with the Roman legionnaires, or it may have arrived with the Moorish invasions of the eighth century. Surviving accounts, however, make it clear that at the beginning of the Middle Ages bulls were being fought in two very dissimilar ways in Spain.

On the one hand there existed a savage, lawless peasant pastime, in which wild bulls were hacked to death; and, on the other, a more graceful, equestrian sport favored by the nobility. By the end of the thirteenth century, bullfights, organized by sporting noblemen, were being held to celebrate holidays. It was an official, and aristocratic game, always practiced on horseback, in the manner of modern "*rejoneadores*," or mounted bullfighters who, nowadays, are engaged to kill one bull before the regular *corrida*.

Bullfighting on horseback, using a razor-edged lance, or "*rejon*," reached its greatest popularity during the seventeenth century. It lost its universal appeal because Phillip V, wanting an aristocracy as civilized as that of Louis XIV, made it clear to his court that he had no taste for the barbarities of bullkilling. Thus, the pedestrian bullfighters, who had been the assistants before, became the principal figures of the spectacle. In Ronda, the first "*matador*" (fighter), Francisco Romero, inventor of the "*muleta*" (a rod with a red cape), was born at the beginning of the eighteenth century. He was the founder of a long dynasty of bullfighters. The modern, daring fight was the creation of Juan Belmonte.

It is interesting to note that the Church prohibited the development of bullfighting on the Iberian peninsula on several occasions. Pius V, in the *Salutis gregis dominici*, in 1567, excommunicated everyone practicing it. However, Phillip II never published the document. His nephew who reigned in Portugal, though very fond of the fights, suppressed them, leading to the actual game that is now practiced in that country—a fight in which the bull is not killed.

An outstanding characteristic of Western civilization has become the denial of the problem of death. Freud, in his paper, "Thoughts for the Times of War and Death," says: "There are three basic constellations in which man must come to grips with death: his own death, the death of beloved persons, and the death of enemies. The first is unacceptable to man's unconscious, the second is reacted upon with ambivalence, and the latter is wished for."

The concept of death plays an important part in the shaping of the ego. An adequate solution of the problem of our nonexistence influences the ego's orientation towards reality and determines the ability of achieving personality integration. The id—the repository of wishes—is narcissistically oriented, and contains no conception of death, but only of physical bodily mutilation. Acceptance of one's own extinction is a step necessary for emotional maturity and the integration of the ego.

The Spaniard has an almost pathological fear of death, and it is because of his need to conquer this fear that he goes to the ring, where death is the outcome.

It is worth quoting Octavio Paz¹⁴ on this, who says: "Death also lacks meaning for the modern Mexican. It is no longer a transition, an access to another life, more alive than our own. But although we do not view death as a transcendence, we have not eliminated it from our lives. The word death is not pronounced in New York, in London, or in Paris because it burns the lips. The Mexican, in contrast, is familiar with death, jokes about it, sleeps with it, celebrates it; it is one of his favorite toys and his most steadfast love. True, there is perhaps as much fear in his attitude as in that of others, but death is not hidden away, he looks at it face-to-face with impatience, disdain or irony. "If they are going to kill me tomorrow, let them kill me right away." (From the popular folk song, *La Adelita*.)"

Every Spaniard thus faces, symbolically, the thing he fears most, and transforms it into the opposite. In the ring, the bull is the symbol of death, and it is the fight which becomes all important, while the actual kill is anticlimactic, unless it is a perfect kill, in which case it becomes an act of aesthetic beauty.

The relationship of cruelty and bullfighting is admirably discussed by Kenneth Tynan,¹⁵ an ardent admirer of the game. He writes: "The midnight games in which Nero dressed in a lionskin would roar through the arena ravaging the flesh of tethered slaves. I try to isolate the qualities which make this revolting and the bullfight acceptable. Both involve bloodshed, both are intended to enliven an audience; and both are exhibitions of fundamentally needless cruelty. In both cases, pain is publicly inflicted, and no apologist for the bullfight, however strong his convictions, could reasonably offer as a moral justification that animals feel pain less intensely than human beings." In another paragraph he adds: "I look on violence as part of my condition and would rather have it in a bullring ordered and codified, than on a battlefield."

In conclusion, I would like to say that although the reach of glory and riches afforded by the profession is undeniable, and the environment where the fortunate bullfighters achieves and exhibits his triumph is suggestive, it is, however, a very difficult and, in most cases, a useless fight that takes place in this search for success.

As I have been able to observe in the two cases of bullfighters I have presented in this paper, the artistic creation in bullfighting is a relief of the intolerable tensions from the fear of death or the aggression towards a feared object with which the artist must become reconciled. I believe that, even more than the aforementioned facts, it is the contact with brave bulls that develops the bullfighter.

Perhaps we could usefully go back to Ingham's¹¹ original ideas, that bullfighting is the result of a negative Oedipus Complex in the Spanish-speaking countries.

But, it is equally important to underline the attempt to overcome this conflict through the omnipotent control over the fear of death, and over the father who abandons his home very early in his son's life. These seem to be fundamental factors of what Menendez Pelayo called "this colossal and tragic pantomime."

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Dr. Enrique Guarnier
Paseo de la Reforma 185-801
Mexico 5, D. F.