

Rigoletto and The Enneagram

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**Abstract**

In this paper I will make an interpretation of Giuseppe Verdi's 1851 dramatic opera "Rigoletto". The analysis will be informed by the psychological knowledge of The Enneagram, and it will be carried out in the style of a dream interpretation. I will thus consider both the concrete level of the interplay between the different characters in the opera as well as a level of internal object relations in the main character Rigoletto. A different perspective on this psychic interplay of characters or sub-personalities will be added by the reflection of the opera in my own mind, and I will consciously own the images and qualities that I project into the opera. Even though the analysis part can be considered as more scholarly investigation, my hope is that the reflection of my own Enneagram Type in the opera will be evident to the reader.

## Introduction

This summer I have learned to play the contrabass trombone. As a tuba player in a modern symphony orchestra this instrument does not fall within my obligations. However, since my orchestra was planning the performance of Giuseppe Verdi's opera "Rigoletto" which requires a "cimbasso" or "trombone basso", I was inspired to play the part of the original instrument rather on the much more heavy sounding bass tuba which Verdi presumably loathed. I took up this challenge as a way of building on the strengths of my Enneagram-type Seven. The experience of a very steep learning curve and the joy of feeling an expansion of my professional field has been like candy for the more gluttonous and novel-seeking aspects of my type. On the other hand it has also been an opportunity to immerse myself fully in all the details of this particular work-project. Since I had to perform on an instrument without the adequate amount of training, I had to compensate for that deficiency by more profound study of the opera. After having memorized my own part, I went on to read the libretto and to listen to recordings of "Rigoletto". Then, during one of the last rehearsals before the premiere it happened: I started seeing Enneagram everywhere on the stage. Since I still had not settled on a subject for my final paper, I decided to go with my intuition and investigate how I could make an analysis of this particular opera using the Enneagram.

At first I thought about determining the type of each of the main characters in the opera. That interpretation did not seem to be superficial and I could not figure out how to justify my assumptions about the specific type of each of them. Then I came across Moshe Bergstein's (2003) article "*Verdi's Rigoletto: The dialectic interplay of the psychic positions in seemingly "mindless" violence*". Building on Mitrani (1996), Bradley (1980), and Freud (1933) he suggests that listening to fantasy or fiction can work as a means of providing insight into "particular unconscious conflicts in the librettist and/or composer" (p. 1296).

This inspired me to take the next step and make my interpretation of "Rigoletto" *as if it was my dream*. In this way I have granted myself full permission to project my own unconscious upon my object of investigation, and I do not pretend that the following interpretation stands any tests of objective validity. It is merely an analysis informed by my knowledge of the Enneagram and can be seen as an in itself quasi-pathological delirium of seeing Enneagrams everywhere after 11 week of intense immersion in this system. The motivation for this paper is also rooted in my type insofar as I see it as an expression of Seven's fondness of mapping and the integration of different bodies of knowledge.

## The opera

Fancesco Maria Piave's libretto to Verdi's opera *Rigoletto* is based on Victor Hugo's play "Le Roi s'amuse" from 1831. The play narrates the debauchery of the French monarch and was banned from publication in France after its première. "Rigoletto" was also censored and only after long negotiations and several changes in the Libretto was its performance permitted in Italy. Instead of the French court, the action was displaced to the sixteenth-century ducal court of Mantua, the names of the main characters were changed. Some scenes that were considered indecent were also changed. Finally the original title "The curse" was also substituted with the more lightly sounding "Rigoletto". With violence as its central theme it was relevant to the people of Venice who shortly before had surrendered to the Austrian empire.

### The plot

#### Act 1

**Scene 1.** At the height of a party in honour of the Count and Countess Ceprano, the duke seduces the countess. However, for him a woman is desirable for only a short while, and already he's thinking of his next victim: a girl he follows out of the church each Sunday. Rigoletto, the court jester, mocks the furious Ceprano, while Marullo, a courtier, reveals he has discovered that Rigoletto has a mistress. Ceprano and the courtiers plan to punish the jester. Count Monterone enters in a fury, and rages against the duke for seducing his daughter. Rigoletto viciously mocks him, and the count responds with a curse he throws at the jester and duke.

**Scene 2:** Rigoletto stumbles on Sparafucile, who offers him his services as an assassin. Rigoletto reflects on the similarity of their professions—while the assassin uses a dagger, the jester wounds with his words. Gilda, Rigoletto's daughter, implores her father to reveal who he is and what his real name is. However, Rigoletto is obsessed with ensuring that Gilda remains isolated from the outside world—he begs Giovanna to keep his daughter safe. However the maid has already organized an encounter between the disguised duke and Gilda. Rigoletto exits and Gilda is left alone with the duke, who presents himself as a poor student. The courtiers are preparing for the abduction of the 'mistress', and interrupt the duke mid-seduction. Rigoletto suddenly appears, but the courtiers persuade him they are abducting the Countess Ceprano, and he helps them carry out their plan. When he finds he has been duped, he realizes Monterone's curse has begun to materialize.

#### Act II

The duke is furious at Gilda's disappearance, but the courtiers try to calm him by relating the events with Rigoletto the previous evening. The duke realizes his men are referring to Gilda, and he exits in order to complete his seduction. Rigoletto enters in his quest for Gilda, and gradually realizes she is with the duke. Even after the courtiers realize Gilda is not his mistress but his daughter, they ignore his pleas for help. Gilda enters, torn by guilt and love for the duke, while Monterone is led to his execution lamenting the fact that his curse has not been realized. Rigoletto swears to avenge himself on the duke, but Gilda pleads for mercy on him.

#### Act III

In compliance with Rigoletto's instructions, Sparafucile uses his sister, Maddalena, in order to seduce the duke, and to bring him to their inn. Rigoletto brings Gilda, who still

believes the duke loves her, to witness his betrayal. When she has seen enough, he orders her back home. Rigoletto pays Sparafucile half the payment for the murder. A storm breaks out, and Gilda returns, to hear Maddalena imploring Sparafucile to spare the handsome duke. He agrees only if a replacement can be found by midnight. Gilda sacrifices herself by knocking on the door of the inn, disguised as a beggar. Rigoletto returns to collect the body, but while attempting to throw it into the river, he hears the duke singing from afar. He opens the sack to find his dying daughter, thus completing the work of the curse. (Bergstein 2003, p.1300-1301)

### Analysis

If “Rigoletto” were my dream, each of the characters in the opera would represent a different internal object in my psyche. To me, each of them line up surprisingly well with some of the core dynamics of type Seven. In the following analysis I keep this in mind even though I treat the characters as separate persons for the sake of convenience.

#### Rigoletto

Rigoletto is the court jester. Caught in this role he has lost the ability to cry and is expected to always be able to provide a good laugh. “To be permitted nothing but to laugh” (Piave, 1851, Act 1, scene 4). Due to this fixation, his development is frozen in resentment, and his inability to cry can be seen as a symbol of the Seven’s tendency to repressing pain and suffering. He is a Seven with a Six-wing “The Entertainer” (Don Richard Riso & Russ Hudson, 1999, p. 266) and nurtures feelings of inferiority along with doubt, insecurity, and cowardice which are the Six-wing’s contributions to point Seven (Sandra Maitri, p.282). As the astute confidant and counselor of the Duke he misses no opportunity to use his intellect as a weapon for maintaining his position of security under the protection of the Duke. As a fear-based type 7, he uses his strengths (a biting wit, and the license to speak up freely as the court jester) to *demand security*, an example of the strategy of the Hornebian assertive types, *demanding*, and the motivational aim of the types in the thinking triad, *security* (Riso & Hudson, 1999). When Rigoletto suggest to cut the head of Ceprano in act 1, he exposes some of the features of the less healthy Self-preservation Sevens as described by Riso & Hudson (1999): “They aggressively go after whatever they believe will make them feel more secure or stave off their anxiety, and brook no interference” (p. 267).

Rigoletto lives a double-life. One at the court as the malicious and sarcastic jester, and one as the moralizing and controlling father. When he goes home to his daughter, his fear of the outside world drives him to disintegrate to point One of the Enneagram and insist that Gilda should only be allowed to leave the house to go to church. This puritan and moralistic attitude makes a sharp contrast to the depraved moral standards he employs at court. He wants to protect Gilda from this other part of himself. This splitting of his personality is the key to Rigoletto’s pathology.

## The Duke

The Duke can be seen as an expression of the sexual instinct in the Seven. Very similar to Mozart's Don Giovanni, except for the fact that he is powerful (in Victor Hugo's original book "Le Roi s'amuse" from 1832 which inspired Verdi and Piave, he is the French king), he embodies the unhealthy sexual Seven's "reckless (...) pursuit of charged excitement" (Riso-Hudson, p. 169). He can be seen as acting from Riso and Hudson's (1999) level six of disintegration: "Jaded and wasteful, they are cavalier about their habits, denying guilt" (p.270), and he is a "thrill-seeker, looking for more and more extraordinary sources of entertainment while being less and less affected by any of it" (Riso-Hudson, p. 269)

As a classic "top dog" he also represents the Eight-wing of type Seven. He is "determined to get what he wants from life" (Riso & Hudson, p. 266). The relation between Rigoletto and the Duke is interesting because even though Rigoletto is inferior to the Duke in terms of power, he nonetheless has the liberty to speak to him as an equal through the role of the court jester. It is this equality of the Duke and Rigoletto that makes possible the intense hate and revengefulness that Rigoletto feels towards the Duke. If Rigoletto was a true "underdog" he would not have dared to seek revenge. This relationship also points towards the Duke as an internal object in Rigoletto's world; the eight-wing's and the unhealthy sexual sub-type's expression in Rigoletto. This perspective can be further deepened because it is Rigoletto, and not the Duke, who ends up expressing "ego-revenge" the vice of point Eight according to Maitri (2001) as a reaction to the Duke's offense of his daughter's virtue.

It might even be appropriate to see the Duke as a "shadow-brother" of Rigoletto. The Duke is and does all the opposite of Rigoletto. He laughs, he is (feels) guiltless, he is immoral, he is powerful, and he is handsome (Rigoletto is a hunchback). It is therefore interesting that Rigoletto's emotions directed towards the Duke are evolves from the resentment of the subdued towards hate, an emotion that presupposes equality and/or antagonism (Robert C. Solomon, 1993). The apparently more appropriate emotion of powerless resentment more suiting for Rigoletto's Six-wing are substituted by intense hate and rage as Rigoletto is increasingly possessed by this split-off sub-personality that however defines him negatively. Of course the attempt to assassinate a sub-personality is deemed to fail and ultimately harms the entire self-system. Bergstein (2003) ventures that the deformity of Rigoletto's body caused some degree of rejection from the mother, and that the duke thus is "the embodiment of the image that was absent from his mother's eyes" (p.1302).

The music of the Duke is lighthearted and innocent. There is not a glimpse of guilt or remorse and if we did not read the text of the libretto we would think that he was an innocent

Romeo (as in Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*) filled up with genuine love. The difference from Romeo is that the object of the ducal love changes incessantly and thus never deepens. In a sense you could say that he is innocent, insofar as we are willing to consider him to be unable to construct the third order of consciousness (Robert Kegan, 1994). Since he is (might be) unable to fully take the perspective of his mistresses, he cannot be said to be guilty of deceit, in the same way a child can be considered irresponsible. However, taking into account his social position as a duke (king in the original play) it is also worth considering that he might be simply taking advantage of his power (as Victor Hugo presumably suggested).

### **Gilda**

I see Gilda as a projection of the Rigoletto's soul child. Maitri (2001) describes the soul child as "These parts of ourselves that were acceptable to our parents and supported by the environment matured, while the soul child remained behind, gradually becoming hidden away in our unconscious" (p.249). She is hidden away from life and is only allowed to engage in the pure and virtuous activities immersed in the solitude and seriousness that Rigoletto himself is denied. On the psychological level of the opera we can thus say that Rigoletto has imposed his soul child onto his daughter, Gilda, in a way that prevents her from realizing her own personality. Maitri (2001) describes the soul child of point Seven as "this young place inside that wants to hide from life and connect with it from a distance" (p.257).

On a more symbolic level, Gilda represents Rigoletto's estrangement from his soul child at point Five and the distortion of its qualities into those of his point of disintegration, i.e. point One, but even though Rigoletto fails to integrate his soul child, Gilda remains the only place in his consciousness where he can contact essence. "If our work on ourselves does not involve making our soul child conscious and integrating it, then it too becomes lifeless and unfulfilling" (Maitri, 2001, p. 251). This is essentially what is happening with Gilda until the Duke comes around and challenges the idyll of Rigoletto and Gilda. Gilda and the Duke represent the primary split in Rigoletto's mind, and the love scenes between them symbolize Rigoletto's increasing confusion between them. Bergstein (2003) describes this very well: "This confusion between the representations of the basest and purest aspects will eventually bring the death of Gilda. The recognition of the blurred boundaries is unbearable, and it may be present for only a short hurried time, before the duke is once again 'expelled' from the scene." (p. 1305). However, it is too late, and the repressed sub-personality (Gilda) has begun to evolve. She is claiming her own independence and sexuality in a way that is unacceptable to Rigoletto. Elizabeth Hudson (1992) interprets the duet between Gilda and Rigoletto in the second act like this: "her passionate voice

can, in fact, be heard as a moment of ‘true confession’, in which she reveals sexual truth – (...) We discover not a terrorized, shuddering girl, but rather a young woman embracing passion and finding the first glimmers of her identity: a moment of self-definition.”(p.238)

### **Monterone**

Yet another alter ego of Rigoletto, count Monterone represents the sub-personality of Rigoletto that is hidden away from the ducal court and who cares deeply about his daughter and through her is still in contact with essence (however twisted that connection might be). In the first scene of the opera Rigoletto is surprisingly harsh with Monterone. Even though Monterone is justly furious, Rigoletto ridicules him as a madman: “You did conspire against us, my lord, and we, with royal clemency, forgave you. What mad impulse is this, that night and day you make complaint about your daughter's honour?” (Piave, 1851, act 1, scene 1). Rigoletto does not seem to feel any compassion for Monterone’s grief even though he himself is a father. It can thus be said that Rigoletto in that moment is being unfaithful to his own “inner sanctuary”, and the mocking of Monterone is really an exposure of the pathological split in his own personality. This is what causes Monterone to cast the curse upon him: “and you, you serpent, you who ridicule a father's grief, my curse upon you!” (Piave, 1851, act 1, scene 1). In that moment Rigoletto realizes (at least unconsciously) what he has done and the curse weighs double upon him because of his double betrayal in his external and internal worlds.

The classical opera motive of destiny is clearly expressed in Monterone’s singing, and a dark premonition of the of what is to come is heard in the low strings and in the repeated sixteenth-notes in the brass. The influence from Wagner is quite clear in the “leid-motiv” of the curse that repeats itself throughout the opera whenever Rigoletto remembers it. The curse can be seen as a metaphor for the inevitable downward spiraling of Rigoletto. Trapped in the lower levels of his type he is little by little loosing his freedom and seems to be left only with the choice of further degeneration or some kind of desperate cry for help and redemption. This last option, however is not a possibility in the dramatic universe of the opera and he continues movings down the levels towards self-destruction. Though I am not very familiar with the clinical terms it seems reasonable to assert that he to some extend is suffering from obsessive-compulsive behavior, bipolar disorders, and certainly of borderline personality disorder. All these conditions are identified by Riso & Hudson (2000) as some of the potential pathologies of type Seven. Especially borderline personality disorder is interesting to us, because it includes *splitting*, which consist in switching between idealizing and demonizing others. The dramatic use of counterpoints between the characters in the opera emphasizes this by setting up opposite stereotypes like the one mentioned between the

“shadow-brothers” Rigoletto and the Duke. The polarity between Gilda and Maddalena is another example of counterpoints. Maddalena is Sparafucile's sister who seduces the duke to lure him into Sparafucile's trap, and who subsequently falls in love with him, though in a very different way than Gilda; she merely thinks he is handsome and attractive, and is described as depraved and voluptuous compared to the angelical purity of Gilda. The *splitting* of the persons in the opera thus represents the internal split in Rigoletto's self-system that eventually leads to a complete disruption of the integration of his psychological functioning.

Bergstein (2003) explains that “Rigoletto's mockery represents his attempt to be accepted into the despised ducal court, and thus become part of the persecutory objects, instead of their victim” (p. 1303). This strategy probably worked to a certain degree until that moment, but because he, in the moment of receiving the curse, is able to take the perspective of Monterone (even if only momentarily) his own internal split becomes too evident and the decline of his fragile personality structure has begun.

### **Sparafucile**

Through the lens of the Enneagram, Sparafucile appears in the first act as a mere possibility in the mind of Rigoletto. It is not until his disintegration down to level 8 on Riso & Hudson's (1999) scale of disintegration that Rigoletto's manic-depressive and reckless behavior begins to manifest with Sparafucile as its instrument. An expression of the panic arising from the awareness in Rigoletto that he can no longer sustain the separation of his internal objects. That Sparafucile ends up killing Gilda instead of the Duke is interpreted by Bergstein (2003) in the following way: “This betrayal may be understood as Sparafucile's fulfilling of his real mission—ridding Rigoletto of the object posing the greatest threat to his fragile psychological self.” (p. 1307).

Ego-planning of point Seven and Ego-revenge of point Eight comes together in Sparafucile as a lethal plan of revenge that is intrinsically self-destructive insofar as it is directed towards its own origin; the coming together of his repressed soul child and his lust-seeking sexual instinct. Typical for point Seven the plan does not turn out the way it was presumably intended. “Reality never conforms to his plan or his imagined sense of what fulfillment looks like, and so he is always disappointed” (Maitri, 2001, p. 230).

The annihilation of Rigoletto's soul child is the final and fatal event of the opera.

### **Fear, The Red Flag, and The Leaden Rule**

As we have seen Rigoletto's type Seven belongs to the Thinking Triad of The Enneagram. Sevens “flee outward due to fear of aspects of their inner world” (Riso & Hudson, 1999, p. 59). This is very true of Rigoletto who obviously fears being “trapped in pain and deprivation” (Riso &

Hudson, 1999, p. 82). Rigoletto's pain is that of the rejected or despised child who fears that no-one will take of him adequately. His red flag in the opera is the recognition that he might not be able to take adequately care of his daughter and protect her from pain and suffering. In his inner world that is reflected by the recognition that he cannot take care of himself and stay free of pain and deprivation. Applying the "The Leaden Rule of type Seven" (Riso & Hudson, 1999, p.83) Rigoletto goes on to make a plan for eliminating the Duke, whom he blames for his painful realizations. At no point does he stop (at least consciously) to consider the possibility that Gilda herself *chose* to become the mistress of the Duke. He insist on treating her as an object with no personal agency. E. Hudson (1992) is aware of the development in the personality of Gilda, and of the often overlooked significance of her actions: "Her tragedy lies not in the act of choosing, but in the subject of her choice, and in the self-sacrificial love (taught her by her father) that leads in Act III to give up her short-lived sense of herself in favor of a man who deceived and betrayed her" (p. 231). That the direction of Rigoletto's vengeance eventually turns against Gilda, might have its own sinister logic, as a punishment for developing beyond the rigid framework he had set up for her.

### **Personal reflection**

When I think of the opera "Rigoletto" as if it were my dream, I feel like staring in to the abyss of my unconscious shadow-self. It is like contemplating the worst-case scenario of my darkest secrets and vices. A message and warning about how bad things can get if I allow my shadow to run the game.

How alike the Duke am I when I walk down the street a summer evening and turn my head at each pair of elegant legs passing by. Many times have I celebrated his "philosophy" of life, seeking pleasures where I could find them, and moving ahead free of guilt. I still daily project my own indecisiveness and falseness like does the Duke in his famous aria "La donna e mobile": "Women are as fickle as feathers in the wind, simple in speech, and simple in mind. Always the lovable, sweet, laughing face, but laughing or crying, the face is false for sure" (Piave, 1851, act 3, scene 1).

The sinister, cold, and biting sarcasm of Rigoletto as the court jester brings up foggy emotions of guilt that I have only processed incompletely, as commonly happens in type Seven concerning negative feelings as pointed out by Riso & Hudson's (1999). I am sometimes afraid of my own sense of humor! In act 1, scene 4 Rigoletto reflects on the similarity between the profession of the assassin and that of the jester: "We are two of a kind: my weapon is my tongue, his is a dagger; I am a man of laughter, he strikes the fatal blow" (Piave, 1851, act 1, scene 3). How many

times have I “unwittingly” hurt someone by means of jokes, irony, and sarcasm? Am I able to make a joke that does not contain some core of resentment, hate, envy, or anger?

When this nagging and unprocessed doubt about my own means and motives become to present, I flee to a place where I can connect with essence. Currently, like Rigoletto, I find this place in my daughter. What constraints and expectations do I put upon her? In what ways do I impede her agency and natural development? These are inquiries that all parents will have to sit with for years like koans that eventually permeate our very being and changes who we are. If we do not take the time to ask these questions, chances are great that we will commit the same errors as Rigoletto, who were never able to perceive the unique self of his daughter. My child is not my soul child, and the confusion of the two can have fatal consequences. As a parent, I believe I have a tendency to project my own history upon my daughter. I remember one time I saw both of us in a mirror and realized that our mouths have exactly the same shape. I was shocked, and it began to dawn on me how easy it is to see our children as reflections of ourselves. When I walk through the park with her I sometimes think that it is strange to walk with such a little copy next to me. Isn't it curious how the resemblance of children with their parents make up such a great conversation material? Everybody loves to comment on “how much she looks like her father” or “but she has her mother's eyes”. There seems to be little space for the recognition and celebration of a child's unique qualities and distinct developmental path. “Rigoletto” reminds me that connection with my physical daughter is different from connection with and nurturing my soul child. Of course they can be playmates as long as I do not confuse them.

I wrote the preceding section last evening before going to bed. This morning I had the following dream: “I am watching a video from my childhood kindergarten that I did not know existed. Suddenly I realize that I can see myself as two or three year old running around and playing. Then my childhood self crawls up on a bench close to me. I am deeply moved by seeing him and I weep from the intense emotion, but I do not dare to reach out for him fearing that it might end the vision. Then he crawls up on my lap and when I realize that his legs are bare, I take him inside my jacket to keep him warm. He rests his head on my chest and I am filled with happiness”. Significantly my childhood self has traits similar to my daughter but he is definitely not her. I even remember checking in the dream to see if it was really myself I was contemplating. It seems that this assignment has brought me into closer connection with my childhood self, and perhaps also towards the integration of my soul child.

### **Conclusion**

Rigoletto seizes to exist. Through the eyes of the dreamer he dissolves into the sum of the other characters. I do not longer know who is who and what has really happened. I am left with the impression of an overwhelming and dark drama about the maelstrom of human passions. The descending chromatic sixteenth-notes that I play in the very last bars of the opera, and which due to my limited skills with the trombone slide sounds more like a sequence of desperate and delayed glissandos, symbolize the feeling of helplessness against “force of destiny” to use an expression from another Verdi opera. What can help us consciously win back our agency from the dark and unfree shadows of our souls? The answer blows in the wind, and The Enneagram attempts to catch it.

It is so easy to relate merely to our projections upon others, and it is very difficult to see whole, complex persons. “Rigoletto” reminds us that we always have to make an effort to perceive the true depth of the other if we do not wish to get caught up in our own inner dramatic representations and dream deliriums. Martin Buber (1923), the author of “I and Thou” writes: “As long as Love is “blind”, that is, as long as it does not see a *whole* creature, it is still not in a true relationship. Hate remains, according to its nature, blind; one can only hate a part of a being. He who sees a whole creature and must reject it, is no longer in the kingdom of hate” (p.33).

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