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# The Empty Chair

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**Funding:** No specific funding was received for this work.

**Potential competing interests:** No potential competing interests to declare.

## Abstract

This research paper, focusing on psychology and drawing upon the works of Carl Jung and Andre Green, explores the concept of the “empty chair” as a symbol for emotional absence and the formation of an ‘as-if’ personality. It delves into the impact of early emotional wounds, particularly related to parental figures, on the development of this personality type. Through dreams and symbolic messages, the paper uncovers the potential for healing and transformation within the therapeutic process. It emphasizes the importance of emotional engagement in therapy and the role of the analyst in facilitating meaning-making and exploring unconscious fantasies. By revisiting emotional territories and navigating inner conflicts, individuals with an ‘as-if’ personality can move towards a more authentic and emotionally connected existence. This research paper sheds light on the origins, manifestations, and therapeutic possibilities for individuals with an ‘as-if’ personality, offering insights into personal growth and transformation.

*“Nothing was as it seemed. I was not as I seemed...I was confronted by the possibility that perhaps the truest thing about me was a coiled identity, my unreal self, a might-have-been self that never really was but wasn't unreal for not being and might still be real, though I feared it never would” (Aciman, 2021, p. 111).*

Jung commented, “As a result of some psychic upheaval whole tracts of our being can plunge back into the unconscious

and vanish from the surface for years and decades...disturbances caused by affects are known technically as phenomena of dissociation, and are indicative of a psychic split" (Jung, 1934, para. 286).

Drawn to the empty chair in my office, Lucien said it represents the desire to be held and supported emotionally. She wondered what the holding meant for her, for me, for us? This presentation explores the personality characterized by emotional absence, a numbness of psyche, body, and soul deadened. Now emotionally frozen, the narcissistic/emotional wounds beginning early were repeated in adulthood, fostering an 'as-if' personality based on façade. As she said, "I don't know who I am. There is a peculiar feeling of unreality. I feel like a facsimile, although I cannot say why. I was hoping to break through the sense of living behind a mask". These comments represent the psychic fragility resulting from un-integrated and unbearably painful emotions. The zest and passion for life is guarded, the self enclosed and shut off, relationships held at a distance.

Dreams from this composite clinical example are focused on what can fill the emptiness through the symbolism of the chair for exploring the inertia of self. The disembodiment from emotions and narcissistic singularity are also characteristic of this 'as-if' personality. This Jungian perspective parallels French psychoanalyst Andre Green's concepts of absence, emptiness and negation, emotions denied but clamoring for attention. The impact of parents, here specifically the father figure, contributes to the disturbances.

The analytical transference and countertransference reenact the repressed desires, dissociations, and defenses. The symbol of the empty chair holds the possibility of understanding the various emotions of shame, destruction, reparation, and hope. The analytical relationship gives space to what formerly was absent. This means gathering language from the void and numbed emotions. Formerly arrested, the emotional reactions are accessed through the analysis, dreams, and symbolisms and the empty chair became no longer empty.

"I begin with nothingness. Nothingness is the same as fullness...That which is endless and eternal has no qualities, since it has all qualities" (Jung, 2009, p. 509-510). Lucien disguises emotional reactions behind a persona of confidence and self-reliance. However, she has increasingly sensed a rumbling from within herself. She dreams of a woman in a flowing dress, red shoes, a man at a piano, dressed in a hat and black suit. There is a formal and large painting behind, and an empty chair arrayed in the same material as the painting. As they begin to play the musical instruments, the painting moves in unison. She commented, "I feel confused and impatient as to what to do with it all. So much is churning inside, but I don't know how to give it words or practical meaning". She added the dream chair is to receive, and she aligns this with the red chair she looks at in my office.

She sits across from this chair and sees it as giving support, holding. She recently found a chair in a dumpster. It turned out to be valuable, originally constructed during the time frame of her birth. She restored it as it was in pieces. It is now a decorative piece and not to be sat in.

Carl Jung wrote his Red Book addressing the spirit of the depths and the spirit of the times. This reflects our world increasingly fragmented and precarious with a feeling of underlying fragility. Many are living with estrangement, isolation, loneliness, and emptiness like experienced by the 'as-if' person. Exploring this personality with its fractured bits, pretense,

and facades involves some of the larger, diverse, and complex issues of our times. British Jungian analyst Michael Fordham (1985) explained this as the defense of the core self, keeping at bay contact with the overwhelming experiences, defending against the terror of fragmentation.

As Andrew Samuels, British Jungian analyst put it, “The symbolic process begins with a person feeling ‘stuck’, hung up, forcibly obstructed in the pursuit of his aims and it ends in illumination, “seeing through”, and being able to go ahead on a changed course” (Samuels, 1986, p. 145). The therapist provides a place to bear the wounds of the unfolding narrative in which the unthinkable, awesome, empty spaces can be contemplated. The symbolic attitude develops within the dynamics and embodied interactions of the intersubjective relational/analytical matrix. “Linking perception to expectation or connecting visual and auditory modalities...is a fruit of the transcendent function operating at a very basic level. It involves the capacity to be together, in a meaningful rhythm, learning to communicate with each other’s basic psychic and somatic functions” (Rienzo, 2021, p. 270).

In the search for psychological understanding emotions erupt, as the therapeutic relationship is a “haunting repetition...of those traumatizing situations that created the original dissociative responses” (Solomon, 2004, p. 642). The neuroscientist Antonio Damasio contends rationality cannot be separated from emotions, which are “an integral component of the machinery of reason” (1994, p. xii). Emotions can negatively affect our rational thinking, but their absence can be equally adverse. Damasio (2003, p. 6) highlights the centrality of emotions for our being-in-the-world, saying that “feelings are the expression of human flourishing or human distress, as they occur in mind and body.” At every analytical session are enacted conscious and unconscious emotions in the service of unveiling the formerly blocked vitality and authenticity. The therapeutic space includes encountering the vulnerability, the fantasies, and tragedies within the tender and fragile, hidden parts of the self. Affective emotional engagement in therapy enables emotional learning and that learning may bring profound change in the inner patterning that determines the way the patient is able to relate (Wilkinson, 2017, p. 539).

These are the emotional states pleading to be collected. Discontinuities in the psyche, places fractured or failed bonds manifest in loss and despair, inner disintegration, frozen emotion, linked with a de-somatized relationship to one’s presence (Goss, 2006, p. 681). These appear in image, dream, and symbolic messages from the unconscious to help restore the personality and convey knowledge of the body. Jung described “a process by which a new content forces itself upon consciousness either from without (through the senses) or from within (from the unconscious) and, as it were, compels attention and enforces apprehension” (1971, para. 683).

Creativity and imagination arise in analysis bringing forth meaningful content and thoughtful reflection. Lucian had another dream of the red chair in my office occurred several months later. Now there were objects on the chair, an old clock, her antique pendant, an apple. She associated this to reading about Adam and Eve in an analytical book the night before. In the dream limbs like branches grew over these objects and covered them in red paint to hold or protect them. She said the dream was one of reassurance because these special things are contained in the red chair with her favorite color.

The two worlds of analyst and analysand blend in this relational field and give life to the scenarios moving into the unknown material. Jung described this as the transcendent function arising within the analytic discourse and facilitating personality expansion. “The suitably trained analyst mediates the transcendent function for the patient, i.e., helps bring

conscious and unconscious together and arrive at a new attitude...The understanding of the transference is to be sought not in its historical antecedents but in its purpose" (Jung, 1960/1969, para. 146).

The psychological journey revisits the emotional places of the incomplete, old issues, retracing memories. There might be panic, torpor, and disorientation. The analyst is the co-creator of the unconscious, helping transform the undigested and weaving new meanings (Ferro, 2017, p. 6). Naming and visualizing the obstacles, joys, tragedies help access the unconscious to enrich conscious life, moving the energy to new combinations. Jung commented, "Every psychological expression is a symbol if we assume that it states or signifies something more and other than itself which eludes our present knowledge" (Jung, 1971, [para. 817](#)).

Although the psyche seeks equilibrium, the ego consciousness will do much to avoid discomfort, but the rejected, uncomfortable material retains pressure to counteract this. If the information is not integrated consciously, it manifests in increasingly difficult symptoms so it can be known. This brings about various emotional reactions, as "there is no change from darkness to light or from inertia to movement without emotion" (Jung, 1969, para. 179). On the one hand, emotion is an alchemical fire and warmth bringing everything into existence and the heat burns the superfluities to ashes. On the other, emotion is of the moment, a spark, and a major source arousing consciousness.

## Do you know my name?

*"But I who am bound by my mirror / as well as my bed / see causes in colour / as well as sex / and sit here wondering / which me will survive / all these liberations,"*

*(Audre Lourde, Who Said it was Simple? 1973)*

The inter-subjectiveness of analysis finds ways into the formerly futile and often deceptive wanderings of a person's internal world. According to American relational analyst Jessica Benjamin: "the need for mutual recognition, the necessity of recognizing as well as being recognized by the other...is crucial to the intersubjective view; it implies that we have a need to recognize the other as a separate person who is like us yet distinct" (Benjamin, 1988, p. 23). Interaction of the patient and analyst on the intersubjective and intrapsychic levels is a "dialectic of consciousness and unconsciousness, of presence and absence, of affirmation and negation upon which the analytic enterprise rests" (Ogden, 1977, p. 22). The personality is transformed by these reflective, conscious, and unconscious emotional interactions.

Transference occurs as each projects the unconscious content activated from the other person. Countertransference occurs in reaction and is also personally stirred from within the analyst. While this is a reciprocal relationship, the analyst must be aware of being an instrument to contain, facilitate, and further movement of the process. In opening the psyche, the body phenomena also are part of the awareness. In the room there are not only two souls but also two bodies in a constant and reciprocal interaction and exchange.

In the transference and countertransference both participants recognize the emotional distress, mourn the losses, and

search for recovery of the personality. Analysis revolves around the conflicts and tensions to uncover the resolution and reconciliation of the opposing forces in the individual (Samuels, 1986, p. 83). The alliance between therapist and client secures trust, connection, fluidity of thought and reverie to move the process to wider perspectives. “Using their own symbolic attitude, the analyst offers a form of meaning to the patient that enables them to take a ‘third position’ to their own proto-symbolic productions. In other words, the analyst’s interpretative activity promotes the patient’s imaginal capacity, enabling a conscious attitude to the spontaneous fantasy productions emerging from the unconscious and to find new meaning in them. In this way, the analytic process involves the development of co-constructed meanings” (Colman, 2007, p. 575).

The inter subjectivity is necessary to escape the solipsism of a separated and often isolated existence developed from the former absence and lack. It is a gradual process of bringing out the damaged pieces, examining and filling them. Jungian analyst Murray Stein (Colman, 2008, p. 472) referred “a sudden shift into a different way of being in the world in which meaning is generated via congruent correspondence rather than logical chains of thought”. This indicates synchronicity along with the meaning making capacity of the psyche.

## The therapist and ‘as-if’

I have been intrigued with this personality type since I first read an article by British Jungian analyst Hester Solomon on the ‘as-if’ personality. It has long roots in analytical thought but originally was dismissed as being only applicable to women and originally to those assumed to be unanalyzable. The person was described as shrouded in disguise. These people feel the need to pose, create images and rely on the façade ‘as-if’ unable to be totally present, feeling unreal. The tender vulnerability, raw, and unexplored potential was hidden, emotion was off, deadened. The unformulated question remained, ‘who am I’.

The emptiness, longing and needs of the ‘as-if’ personality are re-enacted through the therapeutic relationship. Jungian analytical treatment allows a place to dissolve the falsity, face the deprivations, and be finally seen. “The facets of their experience, behaviour and ways of relating...manifest in the transference-countertransference so the traumatic complex be detoxified and the individual freed to fully embrace and constructively express and develop themselves and their relationships” (West, 2013, p. 74).

Lucian withdraws into fantasy and illusion from lack, emotional deprivation, and disappointments affecting intimacy with herself and others. Existing inside a protective shell, living within their invented reality is a safer place, away from the assumed threats, insecurities, and dangers of the outside world. The fragility of the ego is unconsciously defended. There are anxieties about the ability to survive while existence feels always at stake. This manifests as the self in conflict with itself, attacks through harsh inner talk, destructive food habits, body disconnect while living a solitary existence in an empty universe.

According to Jung, the ‘blocking of libido’ as he called it, can lead to feeling life has lost its zest and enjoyment and one becomes stuck and lost. “Libido is appetite in its natural state. From the genetic point of view, it is bodily needs like

hunger, thirst, sleep, and sex, and emotional states or affects, which constitute the essence of libido” (Jung, 1956, para. 194).

Lucien entered analysis for the first time in her fifties. Intelligent, quick, in a high-ranking position with a large salary. There was an appeal to Lucien, yet she was emotionally removed. I dreamt of her and wondered if this signaled the presence of possible emotional distance. Is this to hide the ‘as-if’ or the deadened parts within the personality? I pondered what was behind my dreams and how the therapy could possibly remain without disturbance, all cracks patched over, Lucien was compliant but emotionally untouched. I surmised the dreams were alerting me to the smoke and mirrors aspect of this ‘as-if’ personality, but I did not know all that at the beginning. I just sensed there was distress.

In instances like Lucien, partial selves were acting as integral selves, reinforcing the ‘as-if’ position by relying on persona and image. This helped maintain psychological certainty with her mental mechanisms framed to eliminate any opposition. She was not moved by desire, as the world needed to be smooth and undisturbed, and little could be taken in or disturb the self. This type of person is protected by the rigidly constructed organization of psychic retreat to avoid the chaos inside. All must be ordered, static. Her life focused on work, a singularity of emotional isolation within, stagnating and without the instability of growth and change.

Lucien aimed to please and assumed this required hiding her authentic self. Not expressing emotion, needs, expecting little, feeling unsafe, she seemed almost dehumanized. There was little trust in others, and it was hard to let herself be alive as she had little idea of what that meant but assumed it would be used against her. Beyond the initial charm something was stifled, avoidant while seeming open. Who she really was remained the mystery.

She mentioned being teary and depressed, emotions not previously acknowledged, and now apprehensive due to some anticipated change. But what does she want to change? Career and executive positions have kept Lucien busy and away from feelings and emotions she dared not or maybe could not unfold.

Lucien distances in relationship and avoids, engages in sexual encounters, but is not emotionally intimate. Under a carefully constructed exterior is worry about everything and fears of abandonment resurface when she gets attached. Unconscious of this and needing safety, rigid defense systems were in place to avoid the emotional. She does not verbalize needs and now wonders if this attitude derives from the coldness and lack of passion from her father. If anyone becomes mad or disapproving, a nameless anxiety, the old, sick nausea occurs. Needing to make her life approved by parents dulled her nature and the wild and creative had to be hidden. She often dreams of being in a hotel, a place of impersonal sterility where she is alone.

Lucien learned to mask her thoughts and spontaneous reactions. Parents expressed no empathy, and there was no space for play with them. Over and over, she felt deceived and betrayed by them. There was no way for her to be thought about or carried in the mind of her emotionally absent father, a blank personality who conveyed no expressions of love. Father resided in his psychological cavern hardly attending to his children and was someone to stay away from. Victoria could not understand until well into the analytical work how much this vacant and absent father affected her. For so long, no one seemed to notice his blankness of emotion, feelings, or interest. Father was a patriarch, dictatorial, his rules were



to be followed, she was to obey without question. Mother was an icy shell, half-alive, taking pills for her nerves, busy reading travelogs and going nowhere, displaying little pleasure or joy.

Andre Green's concept of the dead father/mother complex applied to this father and his effect on Lucien. "The [fa] ther is not actually dead but rather psychically dead, that is, transmogrified from a source of vitality into a 'distant figure, toneless, practically inanimate" (Green, 2001, p.170). Lucien said, 'I feel like the fog again'. This phrase has come to mean she is lost and without feeling, a bit dizzy. It often occurs when being spontaneous, having enthusiasm, doing something father would disapprove.

"Without the felt experience of existing (which is at this stage equivalent to existing in the mind of the other), there is no possibility of representing that which is missing since there is no subject to whom it could be represented" (Colman, 2010, p. 277). Lucien's childhood was devoid of father nurturing and empathy. He did not put his heart into her. To surmount the dismay at the parental loss the child develops a compulsion to imagine, to think, to master the traumatic situation and to mask the hole. Lucien's life became emotionally halted. The absent object (father) is a process whereby, in a desperate attempt to thrive, the child splits off and becomes their own parent. From the emotionally dead parent a child experiences detachment, loss of parental love, and psychical holes. When the possibility of a real relationship emerges, like the analytical one, the dead parent zooms in and a black hole opens (Green, 1986, p.162).

An interior symbolic world that is valued needs experiences of optimal connection and separation (Feldman, 2002, p. 399). However, for Lucien family life revolved around mechanized order, robotic, masking the emptiness. Yet, she was reluctant to escape the familiar interactions and face the depth of emotions. The analytic work brings moments of emergence from her psychic narcissistic retreat of singularity into a relational and emotionally connected space.

Conscious awareness of the emotional wounds arouses the disillusionments, the profound disappointments, and the means to cope. Facing illusions and emotional reactions becomes restorative as both participants are actively involved in the interplay of the unconscious processes in the consulting-room. The psychological process takes patience because the unmasking of reality connotes threat to the ego/persona front to the world. "Early experiences of internalizing the presence of an absent object, create the sense of an internal void at the core of the Self" (Solomon, 2004, p. 635). The need for unconditional love, anxiety about hostility and expectation of being refused had been the Lucien's norm.

Being real seemed impossible and she believed her survival hangs on a fragile thread. Aspects of the self have never been known and "their only image is a radical absence" (Colman, 2006, p. 362). Lucien presents like a mannequin set for display with control over body, food, exercise frantic to keep the right image.

The analytical process requires the capacity to recognize and gather multiple, emotionally based personal and collective threads. By entering the problems in a real way while accepting and untangling projections analysis can expand the freedom to dream, feel and think creatively.

The 'as-if' person often begins treatment adept at the socialized self, a conformity to hide the self-condemnation, loss of vitality, and meaning. The private self is not available as it feels too precarious. This person has spent a lifetime of inner deadness, emotional needs unmet. "What is necessary is an actual person to absorb the projection, not a two-dimensional

flat production that cannot interact... the undeveloped core of the patient's self [needs to be] allowed it to emit itself from its incarceration inside the 'black hole'...to counteract the massive power of the absence at the heart of the abyss” (Waldron, 2013, p. 106).

This personality type reflects current cultural tendencies for cover-up, superficiality, quick happiness, and the search for easy fixes, especially as found on the Internet. Their psychological and emotional isolation also contains the yearning for body, self, and other connections, rather than languishing in the unreal and illusionary. Being real rather than 'as-if' is a process of release and personal emergence from inner emptiness and loss to igniting desire and aliveness.

The process is difficult as it means uncovering the issues so the aloneness and separation are filled with presence. Lucien dreamt of standing behind a woman in a Chippendale chair and she puts her hands on the woman's shoulders. Then the woman begins yoga breathing and she keeps hold on her shoulders. It is like they breath together and one enlivens the other.

## Summary

Lucien had been an elusive, passive version of a total self, yet now she was clawing through. Each of us carry hidden, emotionally charged stories and desires guiding our thoughts and actions. Like a puppet master, they pull the strings in our life and shape who we are and how we see the world. By bringing these narratives to light, we can break free from their limiting emotional beliefs and tap into our potential.

As Swiss Jungian analyst Verena Kast noted, (2003), “Emotion is an expression of the self...If we decide we no longer want to hide behind empty shells, then we will have to allow certain emotions more room. We will have to let ourselves laugh louder, cry louder, and shout for joy”. Hope activated in the analytical space is a bridge to connect and transition between what was not existent previously into what now emerges. These experiences through their wealth of symbols increase the capacity to manage as analyst and patient are together between what seemed unimaginable and now becomes possible—to be one's real self.

*“what is greatest about our existence and renders it precious and ineffable also makes careful use of our painful experiences to enter into our soul”.*

*(The Dark Interval, Rilke, 2018, trans. by Ulrich Baerp)*

## About the Author

Susan E. Schwartz, Ph.D. trained in Zurich, Switzerland as a Jungian analyst is also a clinical psychologist and member of the International Association of Analytical Psychology. She presents to numerous Jungian conferences and teaching programs in the USA and worldwide.



Susan has articles in several journals and chapters in books on Jungian analytical psychology. Her current book published by Routledge is translated into several languages and into Ukrainian this April. It is entitled *The Absent Father Effect on Daughters, Father Desire, Father Wounds*. Another book will be published by Routledge in 2023 entitled, *The Imposter Syndrome and The 'As-If' Personality in Analytical Psychology: The Fragility of Self*. Her Jungian analytical practice is in Paradise Valley, Arizona, USA and her website is [www.susanschwarzphd.com](http://www.susanschwarzphd.com).

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