

In the Valley of the Shadow of Death: Gossip, God, and Scapegoating in Susannah, an American Opera by Carlisle Floyd

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Abstract : In the telling of mythologies, stories of cultural and religious histories, the creative arts provide an archetypal lens through which the personal and collective unconscious are viewed, thus revealing mysteries of the unknown psyche. To that end, the author of this paper, using the hermeneutic approach, proves that Carlisle Floyd's (1955) English language opera *Susannah* illuminates humanity's instinctual nature and behaviors through music, libretto, and drama. While impressive musical works such as Wagner's *Ring Cycle* and Webber's *Phantom of the Opera* have received extensive Jungian analyses, critics and scholars often ignore lesser esteemed works, such as *Susannah*, notwithstanding the fact that they have been consistently performed on the theater circuit. Such pieces, when given notice, allow viewers to grasp the soul-making depth and timeless quality of productions which may otherwise go unrecognized as culturally or psychologically significant. Although *Susannah* has sometimes been described as unsophisticated and simple in scope, the author demonstrates why Floyd's 'little' opera, set in New Hope Valley, Appalachia, a cultural region in the Eastern United States known for its prevailing myths and distortions of isolation, temperament, and the judgmentally conservative behavior of its inhabitants, belongs to opera's hallmark works. Its approach to powerful underlying archetypal themes, which give rise to the poignant and haunting depictions of the darker and destructive side of the human soul, the Shadow, provides crucial significance to the work. The Shadow's manifestation in the form of the scapegoating complex is central to the plot of *Susannah*; the church's meting out of rules, judgment, and reparation for sins point to the foreboding aspects of human behavior that evoke their intrinsic nature. The scapegoating complex is highlighted in an eight-step process gleaned from the works of Kenneth Burke and Rene Girard. In summary, through depth psychological terms and mythological motifs, the author provides an insightful approach to perceiving instinctual behaviors as they play out in an American opera that has been staged over eight-hundred times, yet, unfortunately, remains in the shadows. *Susannah's* timelessness is now.

Keywords : archetypes, mythology, opera, scapegoating, Shadow, *Susannah*

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