

Jheronimus Bosch. The Inner Self of the Painter.

Michel A. E. Vandenput, PhD¹

Abstract

The mysterious paintings of the medieval painter Jheronimus Bosch have led to numerous interpretations of the content of his art: what did he mean, what was his message? In this study, the author rather focused on the personality of the artist. What are the psychodynamic processes behind the figures and symbols? He applied concepts from psychoanalysis to one of Bosch's most famous paintings, the Temptations of St. Anthony (Lisbon) analyzing its scenery by scenery in search of dominant emotional themes. Historical writings about the hermit's experience were used in order to find out what Bosch's own fantasies were. Bosch's most pronounced theme is threat by the devil. Possibly a projection of his own anxiety for sin. Against the background of the Catholic environment in which he lived, Bosch seems to have felt the typical internal conflict between id and superego. A mild form of moral masochism is probably on the basis of Bosch's constructions when he was painting.

Keywords: psychoanalysis, Dutch painting, medieval art, Bosch

1. Introduction

Jheronimus² (or Hieronymus) Bosch (1450(?)–1516) was a medieval painter known for his mysterious and sometimes diabolic representations of bible scenes³. His work captured the attention of a multitude of analysts resulting in a plethora of publications, most of which concentrate on the significance of symbolic content disclosed in the painter's message. Catholic symbolism is most commonly referenced since Bosch was an active member of religious society and lived in the Catholic city of 's-Hertogenbosch (now in The Netherlands), which in his time was part of the Burgundy-Hapsburg reign. Consequently, his paintings represent bible scenes or existential moralities. The latter are manifested in the triptychs with sin and punishment as their core content. But the challenging and mysterious characteristics of Bosch's work also lead to interpretations based on other ideologies than the Catholic one: some authors believe that Bosch was inspired by, and even a member of an esoteric association - the Adamites (W. Fraenger), the Rosenheimers (C. A. Wertheim Aymès), the Alchemy (M. Bergman) - convictions based on the interpretation of symbols from the paintings, in order to validate an ideology, not to interpret the inner personality of the painter. The present study focuses on Bosch himself rather than his message. Specifically, concepts from psychoanalysis will be applied to gain understanding of the origin of his aggressive and frequent expressions of devils and cruel monsters.

What makes psychoanalysis an interesting path for this study? Mainly because one of its characteristics is the use of unusual symbols to interpret someone's inner life. Bosch's bizarre recompositions, mostly enigmatic, are somewhat similar to the dream phantasies, which typically cannot be understood through common associations. Psychoanalysis explains the strangeness of the symbols by referring them to early childhood experiences, which have become hidden from the conscious mind, and sometimes appear in a deformed way due to repression. A challenge for the psychoanalytic orientation is that Bosch plainly exposes erotic symbols (oral, anal, genital) that were not explicit in

¹Independent researcher, retired chairholder from Radboud University, The Netherlands. E-mail: michelvandenput@gmail.com

²Although *Hieronymus* is common in English literature, we prefer *Jheronimus*, the spelling used by the painter as he signed his works.

³A general overview of Bosch's legacy can for example be found in S. Fischer (2016).

psychology until some 400 years later through the work of S. Freud, which strongly supports the idea that Bosch was inspired by his own unconscious life.⁴

In general, referring to Bosch and his sin and punishment sceneries, relevant psychoanalytic concepts are the id, ego, and superego, sublimation, projection, eros-thanatos, guilt and the collective unconscious, all of which are commonly used in *pathography*, a form of analysis that uses graphic expression to cure mentally disordered patients. The essential characteristics of pathography and its applications have been described by E. Spitz (1968).

Our challenging question here is: can Bosch's unconscious motives and psychological traits be deduced from his artistic representations? Since the painter is not physically present now, interpretations of his projected phantasies can only be speculative.

Nevertheless, some researchers have already made an attempt to analyze Bosch's psyche. Psychiatrists have made interpretations -purely by looking at the paintings- and most of them diagnose compulsive obsession. Some even indicate a nearly psychotic level of disorder. But given the limitations of their clinical approach -on distance in this situation- a more systematic and empirically founded investigation is necessary

The application of psychoanalysis to Bosch has been promoted not only by psychologists but also by experts in Bosch's arts; R. H. Marijnissen & P. Ruyffelaere (2001) encourage explicitly the application of psychoanalysis to the paintings (as also C. de Tolnay did, earlier).

2. Method

As an object of our study, we chose a triptych. The triptychs are -compared to other products of Bosch- the richest in using strong symbols, and therefore most suitable for a psychological interpretation, and amongst them we prefer St. Anthony's Temptations (Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lissabon) because the subject is, from a psychological standpoint, more interesting than the main themes of other triptychs.⁵ The latter concentrate on sin and punishment and their main internal dynamic is moral warning. In Anthony's Temptations, on the contrary, the conflict between a natural drive and morality itself is addressed. We have more chance to find cues of the painter's own internal conflicts here.

Other authors have analyzed the Lisboa Temptations of St. Anthony in a systematic way (scene by scene), looking for an answer to the question: what did Bosch (consciously) mean, and by what was he inspired? There are: D. Bax, J. Chailley, C.A. Wertheim Aimès, M. Bergman, D. Heesen and recently E. De Bruyn. Our study can be seen as complementary since it focuses on the personality not as they do, on the content.

The inner three panels of Temptations contain together 33 sceneries which we will investigate in this study. Three methodological issues have to be covered first: (1) we have to separate content that was not originated by Bosch himself, (2) we need a conceptual framework for the classification of our observations, and finally (3) we have to develop a systematic observation method.

⁴In his era Bosch was not the only painter showing erotic symbols, but he did it in a noteworthy expressive way.

⁵Only the inner panels of the Lisbon Temptations will be investigated here. The outer ones are of a different nature, less mysterious, less challenging for interpretation.



Temptations of St. Anthony
Left inner panel

Lisbon, Museu Nacional de ArteAntiga



Temptations of St. Anthony
Middle inner panel

Lisbon, Museu Nacional de ArteAntiga



Temptations of St. Anthony
Right inner panel

Lisbon, Museu Nacional de ArteAntiga

2.1 Separating Bosch's own contribution

Before analyzing Bosch we should keep in mind that the delusional phantasies of the saint may not be fully ascribed to him⁶. He was directly inspired by historical texts about the temptations of St. Anthony Abbot.

St. Anthony's life has been described in the *Legenda Aurea* (The Golden Legend), translated in old Dutch, and subsequently printed for the first time in 1478. Another, richer description of the Saint is from the *Vitae Patrum* (The Lives of the Fathers), translated around 1480. It is assumed that Jheronimus Bosch read these books. They were popular in the lower countries in the period of Bosch's life⁷. In this study of the Temptations we separated the original scenes (mentioned in the old texts) from the new ones. The latter are more valuable for describing Bosch's own phantasies.

2.2 A conceptual framework

As a basis for further interpretation of the temptation process, we have classified the passages found in the traditional texts in four content categories. They reflect the essential dynamics of Anthony's dramatic situation.

Seduction: the original texts describe a beautiful queen with luxurious servants; the queen asks St. Anthony to marry her, to support her. She walks into the city with a castle and she claims that she can heal the sick, that she has the support of the Lord. The devil promotes her and presents are given.

Threat: in order to have him yield to the seduction, the devil threatens the Saint and gives signs of aggressiveness: throwing Anthony on the ground, wishing him dead, distributing false messages about him, and sending aggressive animals to him. Even physical violence by the queen is reported, assaults with ladders, bursting walls, and citizens mishandling him.

Resistance by St. Anthony: the hermit declines all kinds of seduction, despite the threats; then the queen is angry because he refuses, she takes her clothes off, transforms herself in a smoking pig. He perceives walls protecting the holy cross.

The Authority: this is the agent setting the rules of conduct: do not succumb to seduction that is the message of the Lord. He helps Anthony when he is mishandled; drives the demons out; but he stays at distance to test Anthony's resistance; angels carry Anthony's soul to heaven.

Although subjective, these elements are a valid basis for exploring the content of the Temptations and also for a subsequent interpretation of the painter, from a psychodynamic angle: they are the main driving forces of the temptation process.

It is interesting to observe how some other (more recent) painters each select one of these elements as the main theme of their Temptation of St. Anthony: S. Dalí emphasizes the resistance, E. van Jasperz the authority, M. Niklaus the threat, and A.L. Leloir the seduction.

2.3 Observation method

The author has carefully examined the art work in the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga (Lissabon) in situ. The three inner panels of the Temptations as they were produced by Jheronimus Bosch can be deconstructed in 33 sceneries⁸. Given our aim -to interpret Bosch and not St. Anthony- we must distinguish two groups of scenes, as we discussed above: (a) some are derived from the texts, and (b) some others are entirely new on the painting, not to be found in the texts. Obviously, the last group is more significant for our study.

The 33 scenes will now be briefly described, together with a qualification based on the categories presented above: T=threat; S=seduction; R=resistance; A=the forbidding authority. There is also a neutral category (=N) for sceneries that we cannot interpret using our frame of reference. The numbers (L1, L8, ...) refer to the pictures shown above.

⁶We do not know if Anthony's story is real or invented. The question is not relevant here since we focus on Bosch's mind.

⁷We have used the historic texts as described in D. Bax's pioneering dissertation (1949). It has been translated in English (1979).

⁸The reader can examine and upload the graphical representation on <https://commons.wikipedia.org>. File: Temptation of Saint Anthony.jpg

a) Sceneries directly borrowed from the texts.

- L3 Man brutally thrown (left panel) T
- L8 Unreliable messenger bird (left panel) T
- L6 The salvation of St. Anthony by friends (left panel) R
- M6 The table service (middle panel) S
- M7 Anthony and queen (middle panel) S
- M4 Attacking monsters (middle panel) T
- M13 Dehumanized travelers (middle panel) T
- M8 Nun and dwarf receiving present(middle panel) N
- M16 Crucifix (middle panel) A
- M3 Ruins (middle panel) T
- M9-10 Bathing people (middle panel) S
- M15 The lame with black hat (middle panel) T
- M5 Bizarre suite of the queen (middle panel) S
- R5 St.Anthony reading (right panel) R

b) New sceneries added by Bosch.

- L2 Guzzling armored fish (left panel) T
- L7 Guzzling genocide bird (left panel) T
- L1 Monsters and St. Anthonypraying (left panel) T
- L5 Observers (left panel) N
- L4 Ironic bagpiper (left panel) R
- M12 Disturbed reading characters (middle panel) N
- M17 Devastated pillar (middle panel) T
- M11 Broken fruit and monsters (middle panel) T
- M2 Burning city (middle panel) T
- M1 Battle in the sky (middle panel) T
- M14 Reading man in ship, tied (middle panel) T
- M18 Armed fish (middle panel) T
- R3 Naked woman in tree (right panel) S
- R8 Drinking mankind (right panel) N
- R7 Perforated mankind (right panel) T
- R6 Table and three victorious figures (right panel) R
- R1 Couple in harmony (right panel) R
- R2 Towers in battle (right panel) T
- R4 Dwarf in gang-way, leaving(right panel) R

These qualifications have been made by the author, assisted by two independent experts.

3. Results

The quotes applied above are compiled into frequencies by category. See table 1 Frequencies of Temptation Categories. Frequencies are commonly used in psychology for the analysis of projection tests, they indicate the strength of an emotional experience.

Table 1: Frequencies of TemptationCategories

	Threat	Resistance	Seduction	Authority	Neutral	Total
Borrowed	6	2	4	1	1	14
New	11	4	1	0	3	19
Total	17	6	5	1	4	33

These findings are interesting because Bosch seems to represent higher rates of threat and resistance, and fewer representations of seduction and authority compared to the original texts. The results will be discussed in accordance with the conceptual framework, category by category.

3.1 Threat

Threat covers a great part of the triptych, and has been mainly added by Bosch himself. Not only in numbers of representations, but especially in the emotional intensity of the images: blood and fire, manifest aggression. The monsters are not physically attacking the Saint, they are cruel and stirring up fear. Where could Bosch's inspiration come from? There is a situational and an internal dynamic interpretation. The situational interpretation means that there were conditions in the city where Jheronimus Bosch lived, leading to a general atmosphere of great anxiety: diseases, city burnings. And we see some representations in that direction on the painting (handicapped people, massive burning).

The internal dynamic cause for the pronounced threat images, related to anxiety, is of a different order. Bosch lived in a Catholic environment and the religious (and the civilian) authorities kept the citizens under severe moral pressure. 'Do not commit sins or you will be punished, possibly for eternity'. Since natural needs, including erotic ones, are part of the forbidden, but also essential constituents of human nature, internal conflicts may arise (the id against the superego in Freudian terms). To attenuate subsequent severe internal tensions the bad drive is projected into devil figures⁹.

The process has been described by O. Rank, as follows:

'As a result of this (moral) prohibition and constantly recurring resistance against it, a psychic tension is produced, which is felt by the individual as anxiety. As a means of psychic compensation for this tension, there was formed the mechanism of projection into the outer world, whereby the conflict is settled, and the previously indefinite anxiety can be thrown on imaginary objects'. (O. Rank, 1968, p.74)

And Pickfort also added fear as an emotional state in the painter's mind:

'The phantasies presented by Bosch are St. Anthony's temptations, which he strove to quell. The artist had a rare gift for expressing them, and could not have done so unless they were the thoughts which might have tormented him. Similarly, the terrors of hell are the artist's own persecutory fears, ...' (R.W. Pickfort, 1967, p.307).

3.2 Resistance

In the original story, St. Anthony does not yield to the devil's aggressive pressure. He remains strong but does not combat physically. Bosch also represents Anthony as a quiet passively resisting person, more but passive than in the texts. One anecdote to illustrate that: in the Vitae Patrum a fierce dispute between St. Anthony and the devil is described. St. Anthony taunts the evil saying that using so many frightening monsters for just menacing one monk is a probe of his own impotence.

It thus seems that Bosch attenuates Anthony's reaction. That may be due to the fact that in Bosch's unconscious experience the devil is part of himself (the id) and that he keeps the balance of conflicting forces in equilibrium for his mental health.

⁹The internal dualism reported here has again been put forward by modern psychoanalysts, however with a slightly different content. The opposing drives are now related to how a person handles the (perceived) good and bad parts of oneself in relation to the parents, how split off occurs, possibly followed by the projection of the bad into other persons. The emphasis is not on the moral dilemmas but on personality development.

3.3 Seduction

Bosch represents the seduction mainly in accordance with the historic story: materialistic (the queen is wealthy, with castle, servants,...), and idealistic (the queen helping the handicapped people); the seduction is not physical, except the naked women on the righthandpanel. But in general, Bosch has the tendency to weaken the seductions: ruins instead of a promised palace, a monster behind the table servants (in the middle panel); further on, the queen makes promises that are not accomplished (not really healing the crisped people, see the man with the hat on the middle panel). Her luxury is ridiculed, the naked women are painted small and at distance, or half covered. Bosch avoids a direct confrontation with the subject of seduction. That can be explained by the fact that the experience of being seduced is an internal process within Bosch; if he would succumb then he would attack a part of himself: a clash between id and superego. We can see the indirect defense as act of the ego. There is a similarity with what has been observed about the threat.

Special attention deserves a scene on the right panel: a naked women in front of the Saint is manifestly in a seduction position, but here again the women is surrounded by disturbing details (a drunken mankind, an dead tree, a cat with pray), and the Saint is clearly looking away (as he does on the middle panel). Although the symbolism can be associated with an Oedipal conflict¹⁰, it seems somewhat hazardous to apply that theory to the painter's inner life without having him present. Our conclusion remains: there is no real seduction.

3.4 The Authority

In the old texts St. Anthony resist in an independent way. In Bosch's painted version the Lord and the religious agents are almost absent. Here again, an internal confrontation is avoided.

3.5 Neutral items

These scenes are very difficult to interpret. Their content is not directly related to the main theme of the painting. Probably the painter wanted to add some personal impressions aiming at setting Anthony's story within a broader context: people talk about it, they are reading. Perhaps this additional context is meant to take some distance, another argument for the painter being conscious of what he did, but not totally absorbed by the story.

4. Discussion

The emotional strength of the threatening monstrous figures are the results of the projection of internal anxieties due to the disturbing confrontation of nature and culture. The projection, combined with sublimation (the art) is a defense mechanism that was successful in Bosch's situation since he has succeeded well in his social environment (as a painter and as a member of a local brotherhood).

We find a confirmation of Bosch maturity in an earlier study by E. Fromm (1969). She made a systematic analysis of two famous sceneries from the *Garden of Earthly Delights*: the lovers in the bubble of the thistle (middle panel) and the bird-devil on a throne-like night-stool (right inner panel); these sceneries were analyzed using Holt's Rorschach interpretation technique. The conclusions of the analysis are highly relevant. Fromm found a high degree of primary process expressions. Combined with his positive defensive effectiveness scores, she concluded that Bosch developed as an adapted creative personality.

A concluding interpretation of our own study can be made about the balance of Eros and Thanatos in Bosch's work. Obviously, there is little love and a lot of aggression. The aggression is mainly internally oriented, the devil against Bosch, and Bosch's reaction to the queen's seduction is only indirect. This form of masochism is (in the West-European medieval context) mainly due to the pressure from society and the church. We therefore would classify Bosch's internal state as a minor form of *moral masochism*. That phenomenon has extensively been described by the psychoanalyst F. Alexander (1961).

Bosch's internal aggressive orientation is in accordance with other triptychs where there is even a stronger aggressiveness expression in the cruel punishments. We assume that Bosch identifies there with the victims of the punishment acts since they receive most of the painter's attention.

We have already pointed out that a psychological interpretation with a historic (absent) person is tentative. And there is almost no documentation available neither about the painter Bosch nor about his products. It is quite

¹⁰A. De Rijck (1993) deployed a similar theory on Bosch using the Oedipal complex and a disturbed relation with his father as a cause of a strong superego and paranoid obsessive projections.

possible that the content painted by Bosch was imposed by his commissioners' orders, or that he was painting emotionless. But it is unlikely to conclude that the major part of audacious symbols would not be the result of the painter's own imagination, and of his artistic freedom. Because of his exceptional originality and intensity, we assume that Bosch identified himself with St. Anthony, and that he added his own feelings to the historical hermit's temptation, but we cannot prove it.

We believe that the process of projection can be found in the minds of many artists and even in our society, especially when polarizations occur.

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