

The Caterpillar Transforming into A Butterfly: The Images of Women in Strindberg's *Zones of the Spirit*

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Abstract In this article I will investigate Strindberg's images of Women in *Zones of the Spirit* ("En blå bok"). I have found Strindberg's judgment of women's character to be associated with a concept of transformation. Strindberg's thoughts about the transformation process are connected to transmutation in alchemy, i. e. how matter is transmuted through different stages of purification into perfect gold. It is also connected to Christian notions of conversion, made manifest in the description of the stages of the meditation process. In describing women, Strindberg often uses conceptions of the initial stadium of the transformation process, i. e. when the alchemist's material is in lack of form, light and purity. She is compared to formless matter, which needs to be transformed by the potent power of the male to achieve meaningful life. The elements of water and earth are said to be her medium and when Strindberg is contemplating whether she will ever turn into an immortal soul he relates to the process of the caterpillar evolving into the beautiful butterfly. To Strindberg, the most comforting of the answers to his questions about female character is that she is a medium of man's reconciliation with God.

Key words *Zones of the Spirit*; Strindberg; images of women; transformation; alchemy

What I mean to show in this essay is the way Strindberg depicts women in *Zones of the Spirit* according to the transformation process in alchemy and to the mediation process. The examples I investigate will be examples of how women are sometimes described according to the initial part of the process, which in alchemy is a very unpleasant one, and sometimes according to the final wonderful stage of the process. She is also compared to the actual force bringing about the transformation and it is this picture of her that seems most appreciated by the author.

Before describing Strindberg's images of women in *Zones of the Spirit*, I will however shortly introduce Strindberg's literary work *Zones of the Spirit* ("A blue book", "En blå bok"). It was published in four volumes from 1907 until 1912, which is during the very last years of Strindberg's life. *Zones of the Spirit* contains 650 short essays that in the commentary on his literary production have often been de-

scribed as meditations and as religious discourses.¹ The word *essay* is however the most often used term. Still, they may be regarded as meditations since they look a lot like the devotional literature Strindberg studied intensively at that time. Strindberg namely wanted them to contain a “devotional word for each day of the year”.

One gains an idea of the great variety of subjects *Zones of the Spirit* covers when studying the headings in the index of the essays. The headings are as follows: “Philosophy equals knowledge of mankind”, “Psychology equals problems of love”, “Religion”, “Art and Aesthetics”, “Literature”, “History”, “Philology”, “Mathematics”, “Botany”, “Zoology”, “Astronomy”, “Metrology”, “Chemistry”, “Physics”, “Medicine”, “Geology”, “Mineralogy” and “Occultism”.² Strindberg deals with such different subjects as the meaning of cuneiform, the distances to the stars, the difficult character of women and the question of how to understand the suffering of Christ.

Of the headings I have mentioned, it is apparent that a large part of *Zones of the Spirit* contains Strindberg’s speculations on different scientific subjects. But above all, the work is characterized by Strindberg’s religious message. In the essay entitled “History of the Blue Book”,³ he explains how the reader should perceive the author of *Zones of the Spirit* — he tells the story of a person who has managed to leave the ungodly, “the black banners”, and become one of the people who have found salvation in God.

To understand Strindberg’s description of women in *Zones of the Spirit* it’s necessary to recognize the general pattern of thought in the work. It has to do with Strindberg’s notion that everything is undergoing transformation, a process characterized by different stages. Those are associated with the concept of transmutation in alchemy. An increasing level of purity characterizes the different stages in the alchemistic process of transmuting matter into gold. It is also important that an increasing level of heat is required to purify the initially raw matter in the alchemist’s crucible. In *Zones of the Spirit*, Strindberg describes nature as well as human life in terms of these different stages. Like the alchemists, he considers the highest stage, the fully accomplished transformation, to be the result of an unknown and inexplicable force. The word *transmutation*, which above all was an expression the alchemists used to name the process of transformation, is a frequent term in the scientific essays of *Zones of the Spirit*.

It is also illuminating to associate Strindberg’s concepts of transformation with the Christian notion of conversion, made manifest in the description of the stages of the meditation process that may lead to the inner transfiguration of man. Even such a process is characterized by a certain order. I use the word “transformation” to explain how Strindberg perceived that people change in relation to one other and to God, and for his apprehension of how different stages of development in nature and in matter can be explained. He deals above all with the process of how life begins and evolves and associates the Christian notion of resurrection with the alchemistic process that describes how dead matter comes to life.⁴

In the following example I will show how Strindberg is associating woman with a force of love that he equals with the transforming power in alchemy and that he also

uses pictures of stages in the meditation process to describe this. The correspondence between inner and exterior transformation I thereby pointed out. I start with an example from the essay "Fractions" in *Zones of the Spirit* ("Fraktioneringar", which is a chemical term that Strindberg slightly adjusted, is used for the different chemical substances that evaporate during a distillation process).⁵ Chemical substances are here shown to change in different transitional stages depending on the degree of added heat. Simultaneously, Strindberg is describing the effect of love in his recounting about somebody who has the ability to increase the degree of warmth and energy in the relationship:

The human personality can be compared to mother lye, which during distillation gives different preparations, as I at different temperatures interrupt the operation. At the lowest temperature I get but gases and water, distilling stone carbon tar; then comes pungent ammonia [...] finally comes aniline, which is the sweet perfume of the almond tree; and the aniline is related to the light [...]. I'm but tar but you can warm me, and I'll be what you make of me! [...] there is only one that transforms me to almond tree, but that person will be able to see all the colours there are and even more. [...]

Now the one that got only ammonia asks, is it possible to harvest figs on thistles? Yes, it's possible to get herring brine out of hyacinth and roses out of corpses. But one has to know how to go about it, and temperature is required!

As the highest temperature is reached, the sweet perfume of aniline appears. The stinking odours that came forth in the beginning of the process are now gone. The evaporating substances become cleaner and cleaner and spread increasingly sweeter smells. The final stage is the perfume of the "almond tree". Since the almond tree is a biblical symbol of paradise,⁶ transformation of a person into an almond tree was probably intended by Strindberg to denote a much-loved person. Accordingly, a person who, just as aniline is said to "be related to light", is regarded as the most wonderful company you can expect. That is to say, she has a transforming capability. The ability of communicating is thus described in terms of a transformational capacity. Skilfulness in this regard is also described as a capacity to infuse life.⁷ Like the alchemists, Strindberg associated transformation with a life giving ability. The transforming power of love is expressed as an analogy to a chemical distillation process. Strindberg is thus describing the purification of matter and the human soul. Heat, the appropriate temperature, becomes an illustration of the purifying and transforming power of love.

As Strindberg uses the symbolism of the almond tree, he is alluding to the passage in the Book of Jeremiah in the Bible where the prophet Jeremiah receives his devotional call via the image of an almond tree.⁸ As God calls to him, he sees the vision of a branch of an almond tree. His vision can be seen as an expression of the experience of divine presence. Contemplation, that is to say, the last stage in the meditation process, has figuratively been compared to a flower on a branch.⁹ As the flowers of the almond tree blossom on a naked branch, Strindberg's almond tree may be associ-

ated with the transforming pattern in the meditational process.

Strindberg used the almond tree to describe a desirable condition. Another expression he also used in the cited passage, and with a similar meaning, was seeing “all the colours there are”. Even that phrase can be associated with the aim of the meditation process: in meditation, you first focus on one thing at a time, but in the final phase, i. e. contemplation, everything merges into one picture.¹⁰ After having meditated on one colour at a time, suddenly one becomes aware of all the colours of the spectrum. In alchemy there is a similar understanding. In the alchemical process the spectrum’s all colours are revealed just as the final transformation is about to happen.¹¹ By using the image of the almond tree and the expression “see all the colours there are” to describe a completed transformation process, Strindberg exploits images from alchemy that also can be associated with the last phase of the meditation process in his description of the love of a woman.

If this was quite a favourable picture of the love of woman, where one can see an estimated picture of her, I will now turn to the depiction of women in *Zones of the Spirit* where Strindberg in his aim to describe women exploits phenomena that comes about in the initiation of the alchemistic transformation process, that is when obstacles occur which make the transformation difficult, and sometimes even impossible, to pursue. As he often associates woman with matter, she is then described as lacking such qualities as light, spirit, fire, purity, transparency and self-awareness. The relationship between man and woman in *Zones of the Spirit* is then characterized by an alchemistic related thought, which is that the element of man is the forming spirit and that of woman, the dissolving matter.¹² However, as we have seen in the former example, women can be depicted with qualities that relate to transformation and reconciliation and with life-giving virtues.

In “Caterpillars or temporary materializations”,¹³ Strindberg compares a woman’s destiny with the life of a larva. The larva is associated with the lack of form and with a change process that invites obstruction, a process that do not want to set off. The obstructions for the woman, characterized as a larva, may, for example, consist of worldly temptations that make it impossible to control her life.

I knew a woman, who was a complete vacuum, and therefore constantly needed company in order to galvanize into something that resembled life. [...]

As she was filled with a notable man, she went out to socialize and dazzled with the borrowed light [...]

But as she was forced to be at home alone, she collapsed as an empty sack, got ill, got tired of life, suicidal. As a larva she was a night animal, slept during day and woke up only as the sun went down and the chandelier of the cafés were lit.¹⁴

Describing the woman as a larva Strindberg is saying something about what he sees as her fundamental character, or rather of her emptiness and her lack of character. He explains the notion of larva to which he is referring: “The theosophists mean by caterpillars [or larvae] the souls of dead men who take possession of people who by nature

are empty and in lack of a self".¹⁵ The author also mentions that in "Faust" Goethe lets caterpillars take possession of the main character and live a faked life in that person's body. A character described as a larva is thus an empty person, lacking a "self" — someone who has never been awake and who lacks the possibility of waking up. The larva, it seems, lacks all the qualities that would make a transformation possible, though it is exactly what it is yearning for, namely another life, "above the earth, in light of the day":

It was the expectation of the larva to be able to fly; and its lack of the joy of life was due to the unreasonable thought that a temporary materialization would be able to live eternal life. She knew death as an end of everything, though death is a beginning.¹⁶

The caterpillar, which constitutes but a "temporary materialization" (as evidenced by the title of the essay, "Caterpillar and Temporary Materializations") lacks qualities for a continued existence, i. e. eternal life, a life after death; its life is characterized by a vain longing for a better life. It has no transforming power making the transformation process possible. Strindberg is also telling that this is due to here leading a fast life.

According to Strindberg the unblessed larva woman, as a result of her lack of form and self-awareness, can be dangerous to other people:

She was naturally ungodly, but had moments, when she felt unblessed, cursed and sighing for redemption, whereby she meant death, the transformation into a chrysalis and into a butterfly.
[...]

But this unfixed combination of elements in fluctuating stages, had the ability to transmute her uncompleted person, and her self was so unfixed in its chemical combinations, that it like the latent heat might be dissociated in a certain moment, irradiate, go out in space, attack from a distance.¹⁷

The unfixed stage she is associated with is therefore not only a torment to her but is also dangerous to the people surrounding her. Her unpleasant attacks are explained by transformations, but her weak character makes the process get out of hand. That which is already fluctuating and unstable "transmutes", changes, transforms and distorts itself in an uncontrollable manner. The larva woman will find neither happiness nor joy, since in her condition the divine light cannot but cause pain and torment:

But she was hunting for happiness, seeking and seeking, but not on the right places; since love cannot be found among the ungodly. If only the divine in man was allowed to lighten up the matter it would glow and warm in a supernatural way; and that which is loss of strength for a person of a lesser mind, becomes a profit for the person of a purified mind; he perceives himself as giving away, but he is gaining infinitely, and he wanders all day in a blissful yearning for the sun

to come down and for the virtuous darkness of the night or the blue night lamp of the moon. And that mystery, it doesn't endure the strong day light, not even the light of the lamp at the studying place; yes, that's the way it is!¹⁸

In the above quotation, Strindberg changes, without any further comment, from writing "she", (the unblessed woman), to writing "he" as his thoughts change into a more general discussion about how the man of clean spirit is renewed by the divine light. This light is now seen to bother people with less purified spirits, like the larva woman. For those who have light and purity inside, darkness, and even death, is not a threat. *He* feels the strength that may transform and knows that to him death is not an end. That is why he is even able to long for "the virtuous darkness of night". How it is happening, how or why the divine light during the proper circumstances may warm and transform a person, however, is a mystery that cannot be explained. "Yearning for the sun to come down", "the darkness of the night" and "the blue night lamp of the moon" imply an expectation of meeting God, a meeting which signifies a transformed life — a transformation which may also have implied a transition from worldly life to eternal life. If you cannot admit the divine light into your soul, you cannot grasp that mystery; neither can you understand the longing for God. Reason is not sufficient — "not even the light of the lamp at the studying place" is enough.

The man with a clear conscience, however, may, unlike the larva woman, feel the light inside him even as the lights are put out. He — it has to be a "he" — still has the light inside after that "the chandeliers of the cafés" are put out and he may with confidence wait for the sun to set and "the virtuous darkness of the night or the blue night lamp of the moon". This is because he has the light of God inside him.

If the divine could warm up the larva, a transformation might occur. But the ungodly larva woman will never experience that mystery. Her destiny is to wander about "seeking, mourning, and asking for answers, without finding any".¹⁹ She is trapped in a condition characterized by questions without any answers.

The larva woman is afraid of the dark. She cannot understand that death is not an end, but a beginning. Her desperate yearning for light and for life will never be rewarded. She does not dare to leave the larva stage and move on to the transformation stage, to the chrysalis that lives above earth and will transform into butterfly. The woman at the larva stage cannot generate light from God, the kind of light that transforms. The only light she might absorb is the momentary, faint and insufficient radiation from a man. The light he lets her "borrow" is thus described as a parallel of man's dependence on the light of God.

Will Strindberg give the woman, described as a caterpillar, a possibility to evolve towards the pupation and change into a butterfly? The pupation illustrates the stage to which the larva woman must progress. She would then be able to withdraw, thereby affording a solution to her problem. If she only were to withdraw from her frivolous social life and from the "borrowed" light, her life would be given form and shape. As long as she lives the life of the larva she is condemned, but the stage of the chrysalis would offer a possibility of transformation.

The author uses the old transformation motif as an image of reconciliation with life. If the larva were to become a butterfly it would leave the life of the material world and enjoy eternal life. The woman, who has neither a real nor an enduring existence, does not qualify for eternity. The life of the larva woman illustrates insurmountable obstacles, apparently indicating that something perishable cannot transform into something eternal. She is in lack of light, of form and of a self; she is, in other words, an immortal soul. The butterfly represents the soul that in an inexplicable way — through a transformation — would catch a form out of the disordered matter of the larva and the chrysalis. But someone who lacks the ability to receive the light of the divine will probably never be able to fly.

This last picture of the woman in *Zones of the Spirit* can be said to contain a very unfavourable view of woman and it's associates with the kind of obstacles that occur in the beginning of the alchemistic transformation process. The caterpillar transforming into a butterfly is a well-known description of the transformation process. Accordingly, in Strindberg's negative view of women, he equals her with the larva or the caterpillar that cannot transform, cannot go on the further stages in the process.

Conclusion

So what I have shown here is that there are pictures of a favourable and a loving kind of woman and those much less so in *Zones of the Spirit*. However, in both cases Strindberg uses the transformation process in alchemy to describe either or. And it is not difficult to imagine that he has had different women in mind describing them so differently. In the last picture it's not difficult to see that he's thinking of someone who he want to learn more goodly manners. In the former text I would say he's thinking about someone he still loves.

In describing different women and women in general in *Zones of the Spirit*, Strindberg also uses other images, including the Sleepwalker, the Spirit of Earth and The Hyacinth. The different images have features in common which can be explained by the alchemistic pattern of thought Strindberg uses in describing the character of woman. So if I was to conclude which picture, the favourable one or the unfavourable, is dominating in *Zones of the Spirit*, I would argue that Strindberg in this work is rather a misogynist. The Sleepwalker, The Spirit of the Earth, The Hyacinth are all pictures that is pointing out her inability to change, or using a more appropriate word, to transform.

Notes

1. See Gunnar Ollén, "Commentary Part" in *En blå bok I*. (Stockholm, 1997) 444.
2. August Strindberg. *En blå bok III-IV*. (Stockholm, 2000) 1723.
3. Strindberg. *En blå bok I*. (Stockholm, 1997) 429.
4. For further information about *Zones of the Spirit* and it's general pattern of thought — see Astrid Regnell, "Seeing Stars in Broad Daylight, Transformation and Reconciliation." *Zones of the Spirit*. Ed. August Strindberg. (Lund, 2009). It has got a summary in English.
5. Strindberg. *En blå bok II*. (Stockholm, 1999) 943.

6. See Mona Sandqvist, "Inferno som alkemistroman" in *Strindbergiana*. (Stockholm, 1995) 162.
7. Boel Westin. *Strindberg, sagan och skriften*. (Stockholm/Stehag, 1998) 164.
8. See Gunnar Ollén, "Commentary Part" in *En blå bok II* (Stockholm, 1999) 1198.
9. Louis L. Martz. *The Poetry of Meditation*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954) 17.
10. Ibid.
11. Lyndy Abraham. *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*. (Cambridge University Press, 1998) 45.
12. Lyndy Abraham. *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*. (Cambridge University Press, 1998) 194.
13. Strindberg. *En blå bok II*. (Stockholm, 1999) 988 – 993.
14. Strindberg. *En blå bok II*. (Stockholm, 1999) 988.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Strindberg. *En blå bok II*. (Stockholm, 1999) 991.
18. Strindberg. *En blå bok II*. (Stockholm, 1999) 992.
19. Ibid.

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