

# Wagner's Parsifal

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## Part I

Art which transcends its own time, in addition to mirroring the artist's quest for truth, is also a source of inspiration for those who contact it. Such art is often extremely complex and its profound meaning difficult to discern. Richard Wagner is one of the most controversial and wholly misunderstood artists of the past 200 years; and his opera *Parsifal* one of the most complicated works.

Wagner felt the first impulse to write *Parsifal* at the age of 31. He was in Marienbad working on the opera *Lohengrin* when he read Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*. This epic poem brings together various mythical traditions; Wagner later added elements from other legends. Three years later, in 1848, the main features of *Parsifal* flowed over into the draft of a drama entitled "Jesus of Nazareth," in which Mary Magdalene takes the place of Kundry. In May 1856 Wagner wrote the draft for a Buddhist drama with the working title "Der Sieger" ("The Victor"), in which the features of what later became *Parsifal* are already clear. Wagner spent Good Friday 1858 in his Zurich retreat where he had a vision and decided on the main motifs of the opera.

In the years that followed, individual characters began to take shape. At the same time, however, Wagner experienced the immense difficulties presented by the subject matter. Time and again he postponed committing anything to paper -- he was plagued with such doubts that he felt like giving up the whole idea. It was not until August 1865 that he wrote a detailed draft at King Ludwig II's insistence. But a further twelve years elapsed before the work was completed in April 1877, being published in book form the same year. The composition of the music took five more years, and only on July 26, 1882, did the first performance take place in the "Haus Wahnfried" in Bayreuth. Thirty-seven years had gone by between the first idea for the work and its completion.

Concerning Wagner's knowledge of occultism, we know he was acquainted with Freemasons, with whom he entered into fierce debate, and with the Rosicrucians. In his library, now situated in Bayreuth and open to the public, there are translations of the Upanishads and the *Mahabharata*, which were just being published in his time. I suspect that Richard Wagner had exceptional intuitive abilities and could see many extremely subtle realms and interrelations directly; also that he suffered deeply because all too often he simply could not find the words to express what took place so clearly before his spiritual eye. It is therefore understandable that he identified with the figure of Amfortas: Wagner believed in living life to the full; he also saw things but could not grasp them. The basic spiritual tendency running through the opera is compassion or *buddhi*. Reincarnation and karma are clearly described in several places -- without them the whole drama would be inexplicable.

A number of symbols and mythical elements are important for a general understanding of the work. First, the symbol of the Grail combines elements of legends from Persia and Asia Minor with those from Celtic mythology. The Grail, the cup which Jesus Christ used at the Last Supper, was made from

the stone which fell from Lucifer's crown as he plunged to earth. Lucifer (the Light-bringer) brought the mental principle to evolving humanity. The stone from Lucifer's crown can therefore be regarded as ego-consciousness or "I am I": without the awakening mind principle humanity would not be able to acquire knowledge, and the first step along this path is "I am I." That this stone was fashioned into a cup or bowl which was used to catch the blood of Christ elevates its meaning because it then stands for the divine self, atma-buddhi. As Wagner remarked, it becomes "Grail consciousness" -- purified, redeemed "I am." The Grail is entrusted to Titurel. He gathers a brotherhood of knights around him, called the knights of the Grail, who devote themselves to the service of this Grail consciousness through noble deeds.

A second important symbol is the spear, derived from the spear of Longinus who, it is said, thrust it into Christ's side during the crucifixion, shedding the Savior's blood. It stands for higher mind, that part of us which must decide whether the mind will aspire to spirit or succumb to material desire.

A third central symbol is the swan, denoting the north. Wagner uses the swan as a symbol of those beings who, though still devoid of individual consciousness, are located in the divine realms, but have their whole development before them; this symbol is identical with that of the angel. In the last scene a dove appears, symbol according to Wagner of "divine spirit, which floats down idealistically onto the human soul." It is the Holy Ghost or Spirit -- atma-buddhi.

The first act of the opera, which takes place in the realm of the Grail, begins with trombones sounding the reveille. Gurnemanz, teacher and guardian of the secret wisdom of the Grail, wakens two squires lying asleep under a tree, saying: "Do you hear the call? Give thanks to God that you are called to hear it!" That the reveille sounds from the realm of the Grail indicates that it is a spiritual call. Buddhi penetrates the consciousness of the awakening men and Gurnemanz feels it to be a blessing. He calls on his pupils to give thanks, for he knows that few are granted the privilege of feeling this call of buddhi.

At this time Amfortas, King of the Grail, lies sick and wounded, the wound being an external symbol for inner events. In his striving towards higher things, Amfortas battled in the realm of the lower mind ruled by the black magician Klingsor and lost the spear (mind). Klingsor wounded him in his side with the spear, a wound which will not heal. This wound is the pivot of all further action. It is the fissure between the higher self and the personal self, caused by the fact that the mental principle was directed into the earthly realm where it is now ruled by Klingsor, or mind linked with desire. Gurnemanz and the squires, impelled by buddhi, now try to alleviate the pain suffered by the King of the Grail. They wish to bathe the wound, though Gurnemanz in his wisdom knows this will be of no avail. The King's wound, an inner wound, cannot be closed by baths or ointments. Wrapped in thought, he sings: "There is but one thing can help him, only one man." When a knight asks the man's name, he avoids answering.

Then Kundry enters the scene, appearing wild one moment, lifeless the next. She presses on Gurnemanz a small crystal vessel containing balsam with which Amfortas might be healed. Kundry personifies the desire nature, messenger and temptress at the same time. On the one hand, desire binds us to earthly things, while on the other it provides the first impulses to understand what is hidden. Thus Kundry serves both the Grail and also, as temptress, Klingsor who seeks to divert people from the quest for the divine through the power of the senses. Wagner remarks that the black magician "beclouds the

divine judgment of man through the sense impressions of the material world, and thereby leads him into a world of deception."

A dispute arises between the knights of the Grail and Gurnemanz about Kundry (desire). The squires mistrust her, but Gurnemanz says:

Yes, she may be under a curse. She lives here now -- perhaps reincarnated, to expiate some sin from an earlier life not yet forgiven there. Now she makes atonement by such deeds as benefit our knightly order; she has done good, beyond all doubt, serving us and thereby helping herself.

Naturally, Kundry was also involved when Klingsor seized the spear of mind from Amfortas.

In his pain, Amfortas addresses the Grail and asks for a sign of help. In a vision he describes how someone will come to help him: "Enlightened through compassion, the innocent fool; wait for him, the appointed one." This announcement of the foolish innocent ("Fal parsi," hence *Parsifal*) refers to the reincarnating ego, which hastens from life to life. If the reincarnating ego gives full expression to its divine individuality in its personal life, the inner fissure -- the wound -- will be closed again, for the mind which has been directed to things of matter will be turned back to the divine.

Before divinity can be attained, however, human evolution has to be experienced. At the outset, mankind is completely unself-conscious and lives in a state of divine innocence, untouched by things of matter and without an independent mind, a state symbolized by the swan. It has to leave this state, descend to the physical realm, and experience all the conflicts that evolution entails. Through the associated suffering and the development of the thinking principle, humans learn from their own experience to feel compassion for other beings.

These developments find their corollary in the departure of young people from their parental home, the maternal plane. Such a departure is often very difficult and may be accompanied by a great deal of pain and many reproaches; but this break is absolutely necessary if young people are to go through their own experiences and develop the ability to think for themselves, though this simultaneously causes the maternal principle much grief. The result is often condemnation by one's fellowmen.

This "descent" or gaining of independence by the monad is represented by Wagner in the slaying of the swan by Parsifal. Gurnemanz sternly reproaches Parsifal for killing the swan with an arrow. Parsifal is at first filled with childlike pride at his accuracy but becomes increasingly disturbed when he looks at the dead bird, and for the first time he feels pity. Gurnemanz inquires of Parsifal his name and origin, but Parsifal cannot remember and replies: "I had many, but I know none of them any more." The only name he remembers is that of his mother: Herzeleide (Heart's Sorrow). Kundry is able to provide more information about his origin: his father was killed in battle, and his mother "reared him up in the desert to folly, a stranger to arms." Parsifal nevertheless recalls that one day he saw the knights of the Grail riding along the forest's edge: "I ran after them, but could not overtake them; through deserts I wandered, up hill and down dale."

The monad yearns for more than a solitary, peaceful life. Kundry confirms this, and informs him of his mother's death. Parsifal springs furiously at her, but Gurnemanz restrains him. Thus although the

monad is endowed with a feeling of right and wrong, mind is not yet fully developed. It therefore turns, in conjunction with desire, to anger and rage. Gurnemanz, the initiate, restrains him.

The rest of the opera describes what takes place during this descent of the human monad. Gurnemanz has already recognized that Parsifal is someone who can restore the divine harmony. He offers to lead him to the feast of the Grail. Both move into their inner, spiritual realms, represented by the temple of the Grail. This realm lies beyond the differentiation of space and time. Hence Parsifal remarks: "I scarcely tread, yet seem already to have come far."

Gurnemanz answers: "You see, my son, time here becomes space." This is because the inner vision appears to the physical person as space. Gurnemanz warns Parsifal to pay close attention to everything he encounters and later to take it back into the realm of his personal consciousness. Before them both a scene opens with a pillared hall where the knights of the Grail carry in Amfortas. The covered shrine of the Grail is carried before them. In the background can be heard the voice of Titurel, the former guardian of the Grail, who received the Cup from the angel's hands and learned the occult mysteries in an inner vision. He says, "Amfortas, my son, are you in your place? Shall I again today look on the Grail and live?" This indicates that the life forces of spiritual traditions steadily weaken if they are not renewed by intuitive, creative individuals. Time and again attempts are made to establish a spiritual, compassionate brotherhood. If, however, the innovators fail, the effort comes to a standstill; the teachings ossify, and what used to be the content becomes a veil, until nothing is left of the original impulse. Titurel must therefore die.

So Titurel calls upon Amfortas to view the Grail. But Amfortas is incapable of doing so -- he has lost the mental principle to Klingsor, the lower mind. Titurel now calls for the uncovering of the Grail, the revelation of occult wisdom. When, at his insistence, this takes place, Amfortas is racked with pain: for those imprisoned in the lower mind, the sight of divine wisdom is unbearable. The tragedy of such a situation is clear. On the one hand, such people are impelled by divine, buddhic impulses; on the other, they are completely entangled in the world of deception and sensuality. When the full, idealistic nature of the Grail appears to Amfortas, so great becomes his despair that he begs to die. But the Chorus sings again: "Enlightened through compassion, the innocent fool: wait for him, the appointed one."

Gurnemanz, who led Parsifal to this inner vision, stands beside Parsifal throughout the scene. At the end he asks Parsifal: "Do you know what you have seen?" But Parsifal cannot answer, as he is overcome by the suffering he has seen. Gurnemanz angrily dismisses him. Parsifal is not yet able to help, as this requires more than just a vision of things occult. He must first acquire occult knowledge on the physical plane. This alone will enable him to internalize what he has seen and make it part of his consciousness. Only in this way can the divine be carried over into all realms.

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## **Part 2 -- Conquest and Redemption**

The second act of *Parsifal* takes place in the magic castle (*maya*) of the black magician Klingsor. Here Satan, personified as the magician, tests Parsifal's will power. Wagner regards Klingsor "as the counterweight to the god-seeking impulse, which beclouds the power of discernment [the thinking

principle, *manas*], with two sources of illusion: the power of sense impressions and passionate desire [*maya* and *kama*]."

How does *maya* becloud our knowledge? If we were to rely on sensory perception alone, we would conclude that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west and that the sun therefore orbits the earth. If we use *manas*, however, which provides us with knowledge of the earth's rotation and the motion of the planets and stars, we come to a different conclusion and one which is far nearer to the truth. There are more subtle deceptions, such as external beauty which conjures up what appears to be a higher, more ideal world; it courts us with diverse attractions and casts a pleasant veil over the world of appearances. If we mistake the attractive veil for reality, we succumb once again to deception. The driving force behind this deception is passion.

Klingsor evokes those forces of passion which compel us into a seemingly endless cycle of re-embodiment, rest, and fulfillment, ever seeking redemption. Through self-castration Klingsor has forcibly rendered himself unresponsive to desire. He has obtained magic power over Kundry (desire, *kama* connected with lower *manas*) and possession of the holy spear (mind, higher *manas*). Now he intends with her aid to gain possession of the Grail: Kundry, here representing *kama* or desire-mind, is to seduce Parsifal, as she did Amfortas before him. Kundry suffers because of herself: she longs for satisfaction and the stilling of her eternal urges. But a knight must be able to withstand, control, and refine the dark forces of desire -- ultimately it is desire which impels us to aspire to higher things.

Kundry resists the entreaties of the magician, but when Parsifal enters the realm of Klingsor, she succumbs to the magician's power lower mind naturally feels drawn to its divine origin. The violent love which she feels, however, is the result of desire. Thus tragedy is preordained.

When Parsifal enters the magic castle, Klingsor conceals himself and turns the area into a beautiful tropical garden where young maidens clad in soft-colored veils dance. When Parsifal approaches, they embrace him, and the game with the flower maidens begins. The higher self can only play with beauty; as soon as one is entrapped by it, his powers become bound to the physical realm. The maidens want more than just to play, and they crowd around him. Firmly driving them off, Parsifal cries: "Have done! You shall not catch me!"

The first attempt at seduction through the power of deceptive beauty has been repulsed. But when Kundry enters and calls his name -- Parsifal -- he is shocked, because his mother had once addressed him in just the same way in a dream. The flower maidens fade away and Parsifal recognizes the deceptive nature of the material world. Now the power of the desire world is revealed to him: Kundry becomes visible. She tells Parsifal of his origin: Parsifal (the monad) left the world of illusion and went his way, following the laws of spirit. In the world of appearances it is impossible to understand such decisions. So great is the sorrow of his mother (his biological origin) at his decision that she finally dies. When Kundry tells of his mother's grief when he ran away to seek higher things, she awakens the pity of the higher self with regard to the personal self. Parsifal sinks down at Kundry's feet and torments himself with severe self-reproaches.

Parsifal experiences here the possibly strongest temptation the aspiring human being can encounter. Overpowering pity in the face of suffering has proved the undoing of many who betrayed their divine ideals for the sake of alleviating suffering. In his state of weakness, Kundry tells Parsifal of the great

love between his parents; nevertheless, he does not give in to Kundry's fantasies but sees Amfortas before him. This time he does not merely see the sorrow in the realm of the Grail, as in the first act, but suffers it directly. Parsifal suddenly starts up with a gesture of the utmost terror, his demeanor expresses some fearful change; he presses his hands hard against his heart as if to master an agonizing pain. He cries: "Amfortas! The wound! The wound! It burns within my heart!"

Parsifal remembers what he saw in the temple of the Grail and "falls into a complete trance." The vision of his link with divinity awakens once again within him. He is filled with deep compassion which no longer relates to the personal self, nor to the suffering of the spiritual self (Amfortas), but to the inmost divine heart of creation calling us to liberation. It is compassion for his own essential divinity (*atma-buddhi*, the higher duad) which is enchained by the fetters of desire. This compassion for the divine activates love of the divine and sets in motion the will to complete the process of attaining divinity.

Kundry tries to hinder Parsifal's compassion, but he recognizes the demonic nature of her attempt. Kundry tries to kiss Parsifal, but he forcefully repulses her. This is the turning point of the whole drama. The deceptive maneuver of the black magician which brought about the downfall of Amfortas and the knights of the Grail, is penetrated by Parsifal, enabling him to achieve clearness of vision. He sees through the bewildering attacks of his adversary and hears the call of the divine will to redemption "in proving himself through the active pity he feels for the sorrow of humanity" (quotation from Wieland Wagner).

Only now does Klingsor begin his most powerful attack on the initiate. Through Kundry he attempts to conjoin universal love with the personal. Kundry reveals to Parsifal the tragedy of her existence and her own suffering, saying:

One for whom I yearned in deathly longing, whom I recognized though despised and rejected, let me weep upon his breast, for one hour only be united to you and, though God and the world disown me, in you be cleansed of sin and redeemed!

Parsifal here recognizes Klingsor's seductive attack on his will to redemption. He discerns the way in which the human desire nature repeatedly feigns reformation and binds us to things of matter. He again repulses Kundry, saying: "For evermore would you be damned with me if for one hour, unmindful of my mission, I yielded to your embrace."

The seducing skills become increasingly spiritual (*geistig*). Kundry begs for pity and promises Parsifal the attainment of divinity. But the initiate understands that in no event must he allow himself to be ruled by the desire nature; only if desire is used to liberate the aspiring human ego will it be redeemed. He says to Kundry: "Love and redemption shall be yours if you will show me the way to Amfortas."

Kundry tries once again to win Parsifal's act of redemption for herself: she tries to embrace him and implores him to take pity. But it is too late: Parsifal is already in a higher state of consciousness. He vigorously pushes her aside. The initiate has withstood the test. Kundry flies into a fury and curses "the fool" in her selfish longing for redemption. She tries to prevent him from reaching the Grail. Klingsor appears in person and hurls the spear at Parsifal, but Parsifal catches the spear and holds it above his head: sensuous lower mind is transformed into aspiring higher mind. Parsifal says: "With this sign I

roust your enchantment. As the spear closes the wound which you dealt him with it, may it crush your lying splendor into mourning and ruin!" In the light of the higher mind the demonic illusion fades away; Klingsor's magic realm sinks as if by an earthquake.

The third act, concerning redemption, takes place in the realm of the Grail on the morning of Good Friday: flowers are in bloom all around and desire moves through the whole of nature, awakening it to new life.

Gurnemanz enters from a humble hermit's hut, when he hears Kundry moaning. He notices a change in her: the wildness has vanished. She allows Gurnemanz to reawaken her from her paralysis. Her only concern seems to be to serve the knights of the Grail, but Gurnemanz informs her of a change in the knightly order: the spring of divine wisdom has failed. Everyone now looks after himself.

Meanwhile Parsifal enters clad in black armor, which Wagner regarded as a symbol of will power, the fighting strength of the personal self. He saw the conquest of the powers of illusion as an act requiring personal effort and struggle -- the assertion of the higher will in the midst of personal, earthly life:

a strong awareness of [suffering] can raise the intellect of the higher nature to knowledge of the meaning of the world. Those in whom this sublime process takes place, it being announced to us by a suitable deed, are called heroes. -- *Collected Writings of R. Wagner*, vol. 10

Gurnemanz calls upon the "stranger" to lay down his weapons at this holy spot. Parsifal then "thrusts the spear into the ground before him, lays shield and sword beneath it, opens his helmet, takes it from his head and lays it with the other arms, then kneels before the spear in silent prayer. . . . Parsifal raises his eyes devoutly to the spearhead."

In the realm of the Grail or *buddhi*, the weapons of the personal consciousness are sacrificed to the power of intuition: the helmet of intelligence, the shield of courage, and the sword of the active will, while the point of the spear (mind) represents the moment of maximum concentration which leads to an intuitive understanding of the world. Gurnemanz now recognizes the spear and also the man who had once slain the swan. The spear is back in the realm of the Grail: the power of intuition shines again. When asked where he comes from, Parsifal answers: "Through error and the path of suffering I came; . . . An evil curse drove me about in trackless wandering, never to find the way to healing; numberless dangers, battles, and conflicts forced me from my path even when I thought I knew it."

Gurnemanz reports that since Titurel's death the state of the Order has worsened: intuition has been completely lost, and the Grail itself remains enclosed within the shrine. The knights now feed only on dogmas. Parsifal springs up in intense grief -- he feels responsible for the knights' suffering since he, the chosen "Redeemer," had succumbed to maya (illusion). Amfortas is due to open the shrine in which the Grail is concealed on that very day, when his father is carried to his grave. Gurnemanz wants to take Parsifal to him. But first, one of the most significant scenes of the opera takes place: as Kundry bathes Parsifal's feet, the full consciousness of his task awakens in him. Once the purification and cleansing of the personal self (the feet) have been carried out, Gurnemanz proceeds to anoint his head -- his spiritual judgment must likewise light up pure and spotless within the personal self -- enabling the personal self to be united with the divine self of its own free will.

Parsifal is thereby made King of the Grail. His first office is to baptize Kundry: the desire nature is incorporated into the community as an element necessary to progress, and becomes the driving force of pure divine love. That desire no longer serves the lower, but the higher self, brings about a transformation in the whole of nature. In Gurnemanz's words: "Thus all creation gives thanks, all that here blooms and soon fades, now the nature, absolved from sin, today gains its day of innocence." Parsifal then kisses Kundry gently on the forehead.

In the distance the sound of bells is heard. As they approach the temple of the Grail, time once more becomes space and the interior of the temple becomes visible. It is the same scene as at the end of the first act, but more gloomy. Two processions of knights enter the stage, one carrying Titurel's coffin, the other with Amfortas on his deathbed. The knights are aware that without the creative power of intuition of the Grail, they are doomed to die. They are not strong enough to open the shrine themselves and therefore insistently press Amfortas to do so, but in his immeasurable pain he is no longer able to open the shrine. He calls upon the knights to kill him, since no one is able to close the wound.

At this moment the divine love of the higher self breaks through: Parsifal enters the hall, accompanied by Gurnemanz and Kundry and, touching the wound with the end of the spear, says: "But one weapon serves: only the spear that smote you can heal your wound." The personal mind, gravitating to things of earth, opened up the gulf in human nature; the intuitive mind closes the fissure between the spiritual and earth-bound poles. Parsifal continues: "Be whole, absolved and atoned! For I now will perform your task. O blessed be your suffering, that gave pity's mighty power and purest wisdom's might to the timorous fool!"

Parsifal steps towards center stage, holding the spear aloft before him, saying: "I bring back to you the holy spear!" All gaze in reverence at the uplifted spear, to whose point Parsifal raises his eyes and intones:

O supreme joy of this miracle! This that could heal your wound I see pouring with holy blood yearning for that kindred fount which flows and wells within the Grail. No more shall it be hidden: uncover the Grail, open the shrine!

[Parsifal mounts the altar steps, takes the Grail from the shrine now opened by the squires, and kneels before it in silent prayer and contemplation. The Grail begins to glow with a soft light, increasing darkness below and growing illumination far above.

A beam of light: the Grail glows at its brightest. From the dome a white dove descends and hovers over Parsifal's head. Kundry slowly sinks lifeless to the ground in front of Parsifal, her eyes uplifted to him. Amfortas and Gurnemanz kneel in homage to Parsifal, who waves the Grail in blessing over the worshipping brotherhood of knights.]

Wagner by these stage directions for the final scene epitomizes the ultimate triumph of the hero-soul. Through Parsifal's act the earthbound human mind is directed upwards again towards divinity; the power of creative intuition flows again through all the realms. As a result, the fossilized spiritual tradition of Titurel is reinvigorated, and he rises from his coffin. The divine spirit, symbolized by the dove, hovers over Parsifal's head, i.e., the consciousness of the higher ego experiences its innate divinity. This represents a transformation into something completely new: the attainment of Mastery.



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