Alchemy and Homophobia in Western Society
Dr Robert O’Dea

Terms used in this paper

**Homophobia:**
An intense, abnormal, illogical or over-reactive fear of homosexuality or a homosexual lifestyle.

**Xenophobia:**
The fear of difference or the contempt of strangers and foreigners.

**Aberrant:**
Behaviour that represents a disturbance and a deviation from expected social behaviour.

**The Shadow:**
The darker, hidden side of the psyche that unexpectedly over-reacts to certain people or certain situations.

**Alien:**
Not one’s own, unfamiliar, repugnant, adverse or an outsider.

**Projection:**
Attributing the suppressed, repressed and unchallenged contents of one’s own unconscious onto others so that it becomes difficult to distinguish between one’s own characteristics and those of the object of one’s projection.

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Introduction

Some readers may know the term Alchemy from the generally discredited attempt by the ancient Alchemists to transmute lead into gold and this is in fact where the term derives. It is true that the ancient Alchemists were unsuccessful in their attempts to transmute lead into gold and thus they were generally treated as frauds and charlatans. However, they were successful in transmuting lead into silver. Furthermore, in 1941 the physicists Anderson, Bainbridge & Sherr produced gold by the nuclear bombardment of mercury. This raises the possibility that the Alchemists were correct all along: Lead can indeed be transmuted through the elements into gold, if one has the correct technology. The ancient Alchemists did not of course have access to such technology.

Jung believed that the chemical changes in the base metal corresponded to the psychological changes in the psyche of the participating Alchemist. Thus for Jung, Alchemy equaled an inner psychological journey. Consequently, Jung used this as the basis of his analytical psychology of the early 20th century. In Jung’s view involvement in the process of Alchemy has the potential to bring about effective, expansive and important change by assisting to make the foundations of the psyche more secure. An individual’s involvement in and commitment to the process of Alchemy facilitates a psychological means whereby extremely difficult, harmful, hurtful or confronting experiences may be perceived as positive, by allowing a different perception to flood into consciousness.

Thus Alchemy as it is used in this paper is basically a philosophy. It aims to encourage those who are interested in personal growth and in discovering how that growth can bring about positive change in one’s own life, in society and in the world around us. As Coelho says:

That’s what alchemists do. They show that, when we strive to become better than we are, everything around us becomes better, too. (p.1)

The process of Alchemy encourages a conscious, individual move from the lower level of the ego (called lead in Alchemy), through the level of introspection and the withdrawal of projection (silver) and into a level of higher consciousness (gold).

An overview of this process is shown in Figure 1.
Figure 1  An Overview of Jungian Alchemy

The Lesser Work – Nigredo - Symbol: Lead
The Ego State
Projection & transference of the contents of the Shadow onto others.
Beliefs: It is somebody else’s fault. Life isn’t fair. It has nothing to do with me. It’s not right.
Questions: Whose fault is this? Why is it happening to me?

The Middle Work – Albedo - Symbol: Silver
The Beginning of the Process of Introspection.
Introspection and the withdrawal of projection & of transference onto others.
Beliefs: I just can’t understand it. I really can’t help it.
Questions: What does it all mean? Why is it happening?

The Great Work: Rubedo - Symbol: Gold
A State of Higher Consciousness in all things.
Self-awareness & the desire to make the world a better place.
Beliefs: I can really do something to help others. I can make a difference in the world.
Questions: What can I learn from this? What is the significance of my life in the bigger picture of life?

This process of Alchemy will now be related to homophobia.

Homophobia and Alchemy

This Jungian process of Alchemy can be applied to the different types and manifestations of homophobia that exist in some parts of Western Society and to different degrees within these parts of society. Often the nature of homophobia is covert and insidious and it is covered up by political correctness, social mores and superficiality. Furthermore, homophobia is not solely related to the experience of gay men as this form of discrimination and prejudice is often related to the lesbian experience. In fact, this whole area may be more related to xenophobia and this would be another interesting and pertinent study and paper. However, this paper will concentrate on homophobia and the experience of homophobia for gay men.

As with all forms of discrimination, fear and prejudice, homophobia occurs in four ways these being:
This paper will now explore how each of these ways is contained within and manifests within the three levels of Alchemy.

In the Ego, the first level of Alchemy, the individual is rarely aware that any views, beliefs, thoughts, dogmas, childhood experiences and judgments are repressed or suppressed in the unconscious mind. This lack of awareness, which Jung calls ‘unconsciousness’, comprises the Shadow that is held and hidden within the Ego. Since the individual is unaware of its existence, the Shadow remains unchallenged. In this Ego state, individuals in general do not believe or are not prepared to acknowledge that their personal beliefs and attitudes make any difference to what is going on in society and the world around them, or contribute to it in any way. This leaves such individuals firmly embedded in the Ego from where the Shadow continues to control their behaviour in society and in the world. It is from this place that the Shadow over-reacts and overt homophobia, non-acceptance, bullying, aggression, harassment, repression, violence, intimidation and sometimes even murder projects out onto gay men as shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**  The Projection of Homophobia from The Shadow

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Lesser Work – Lead – Ego</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An individual rejects gay men &amp; a gay life style unequivocally on all levels.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Morally and Spiritually**

The dominant religious text forbids homosexuality & it is thus not acceptable in any form. An individual believes they may enforce this dogma in any manner they wish including the abuse of power and position.

**Emotionally**

An individual believes gay men cannot contribute to society equally with heterosexual men & rejects gay men completely.

**Physically**

The homophobic belief is that the physical homosexual sex act is not acceptable, cannot be tolerated in any form, is repugnant & that it must be prevented from occurring.
Mentally

Intellectually, individuals cannot accept anything about homosexuality, gay men or the gay lifestyle. It is believed that homosexuality is a sickness, a genetic or other fault in those men & that it must be changed, fixed or cured.

Jung however clearly and often stated his belief that the individual who withdraws the projection of the contents of the Shadow is doing work of immense social and political value. This occurs because when one withdraws one’s projection, it requires the individual to begin the process of accepting some level of responsibility for that which is:

1. contained in the Shadow including its source, and
2. occurring around one, in society and in the world at large, as a result of the projection of the contents of the Shadow onto others.

In the second level of Alchemy, the withdrawal of projection, an individual starts to question the beliefs that are contained within the Shadow. These beliefs may be held from childhood, a result of childhood experiences or may be those professed by authority figures such as parents, partners, friends, religious leaders, political leaders, teachers, gangs or peer groups. Through a conscious effort of psychological work, self-help, dream analysis, meditation or some other form of introspection, an individual in this level withdraws the projection of the contents of the Shadow and begins to accept responsibility and ownership for what is contained within the Shadow. This is shown in Figure 3 below.

In the third level of Alchemy, the individual has:

1. come to terms with the contents of the Shadow, realizing that anything contained within it is the owner’s responsibility and has nothing to do with anyone else, and
2. learnt to accept the true reality of every situation, even if it is inconvenient, different or challenging to one’s own life.

Through working with and understanding the contents of the Shadow and withdrawing all projection from others, an individual attains a level of higher consciousness in all things. In this way, the individual moves into a position of standing on firm and solid ground within, of self-acceptance and peace within.
The Middle Work - Silver – Withdrawal of Projection
An individual conditionally accepts gay men on most levels but one or more of the levels are too challenging to their beliefs, are debatable or unacceptable. An individual often has a child or a friend who is gay.

Morally and Spiritually
Because the dominant religious text forbids homosexuality, the individual professes acceptance of gay men but believes it to be morally wrong.

Emotionally
The individual professes acceptance of gay men but secretly believes that they cannot love, commit, be trusted with children, raise families or contribute to society equally with heterosexual men.

Physically
Professed acceptance of gay men is the individual’s public persona. However the inner belief that the physical gay sexual act is somehow flawed, unnatural or not as acceptable as the predominant, socially acceptable, physical heterosexual act is secretly held.

Mentally
The individual socially accepts gay men but based on such things as mental conditioning, past beliefs, past experiences, childhood experiences, history, etc., maintains an intellectual belief that homosexuality is aberrant behaviour.

This is what Jung calls ‘Individuation’. In this level, an individual is able to totally accept any difference in others and truly and genuinely believe in the equality of all as shown in Figure 4 below.

In terms of the discussion in this paper this would entail complete acceptance of all gay men, gay young men, gay boys, gay couples, gay sexuality, gay dating or a gay lifestyle despite its difference, variety and what is sometimes referred to as its risky, overtly sexual and confrontational nature.
**Figure 4  Individuation, Acceptance and Equality**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Great Work – Gold – Higher Consciousness</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This is the level where an individual totally accepts gay men as an equal part of society on all levels with equal rights and opportunities.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Morally and Spiritually</th>
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<tr>
<td>Individuals in higher consciousness accept that the world was created as perfect so therefore everything in the world must be perfect, including gay men and their lifestyles.</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Emotionally</th>
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<tr>
<td>Individuals at this level genuinely believe that gay men are equally good members of society in every way.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Physically</th>
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<tr>
<td>The belief is that sex is a natural part of life, including gay sex.</td>
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<th>Mentally</th>
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<tr>
<td>At this level of consciousness, individuals accept that love is love in all its forms and aspects &amp; they are responsible for accepting difference as it presents itself in the world around them.</td>
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**Conclusion**

The use of Alchemy in this way, as an empowering process of self-realization and self-awareness, still may prove to be the equivalent of Zen for the Western way of thinking. Jung has drawn a conclusive and credible analogy that the psychological and spiritual growth of the individual is a comparable process to the Alchemic work, i.e. that life and the psychological changes that take place as we seek to understand our own psyches is in fact ‘The Great Work’. As Segaller and Berger (1989) assert:

> The connection between who we are inside and what we do, seems almost too obvious to be discussed. But there are relatively few people spending any real effort on making the connection (p.7).

Homophobia directed towards gay men in any form is insidious and cannot be tolerated in modern societies where laws are written and in place to protect the rights of all gay people. With such laws in place, why are many boys and men in families, schools, colleges, universities, businesses and those within marriages
(both gay and heterosexual) in Western Societies still hiding in fear of their true sexuality being discovered?

Why are gay websites full of ads and profiles from boys and men that display fear, mistrust and inacceptance of their own lifestyle and their choice of sexuality? Why are there young men prostituting themselves on gay websites or pretending to do so? Why is it that in Western Societies of the 21st Century, a gay flag on a gay club has to be unfurled every night and hidden from view every day? Why is it that on some modern campuses in Western Societies there are no safe places for gay boys and gay men to congregate, to meet, to enjoy each other’s company and to express their love for each other in complete safety? Why are those who wish to research in the academic area of homosexuality and make it better for gay boys and gay men to live as they wish in society actively prevented from doing so?

The answer to all these questions is homophobia. This author has seen the effects such as fear, depression, phobia, anxiety, disorders, aberrant behaviour, drug addiction and suicide that are both a direct and an indirect result of the different forms of homophobia mentioned above.

Homophobia is a projection of the contents of the Shadow onto others. As with many forms of phobia (not least that of xenophobia) this projection is aimed towards difference in another person or towards one from another tribe. And indeed, gay boys and gay men do represent a different, queer, sometimes challenging and confronting, often overtly sexual tribe within society. Throughout history and particularly in the history of the last fifteen years, the dominant tribes have clearly shown how they treat those who are, or who are considered alien. But as Kluger points out:

We face our biggest challenges not when we’re called on to behave ourselves within our family, community or workplace but when we have to apply the same moral code to people outside our tribe (p.60).

The only answer to addressing homophobia and indeed all forms of oppression, repression, rejection, discrimination and intimidation is for each one of us individually and all of us collectively to take responsibility for the attitudes, beliefs and judgments that remain unchallenged in the Shadow. It is Jung’s view and certainly the view of this author that every individual has a moral, spiritual, emotional, physical and mental responsibility to challenge the contents of the Shadow and withdraw the projection of these contents onto others. This creates the collective withdrawal of projection, a positive Alchemic helix, a ripple in the pond effect where each individual strives to be the best that they can be and facilitates others to do the same. It is in this way that each one of us can make positive
changes in our own lives, in the lives of those around us, in the lives of gay boys, gay young men and gay men and in the acceptance of difference in the world. This is ‘The Great Work’ on which the ancient Alchemists based their science and to which they refer with the dictum: ‘As within. So without. As above. So below.’

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