# Numinosity as a therapeutic factor: from symptom to symbol

*Oksana V. Kuznetsova**

Academy of Integral Psychodynamic Psychotherapy, Moscow, Russia

Received: Dec 30, 2025
Accepted: Jan 22, 2026
Published: Mar 1, 2026

**For citation:**
Kuznetsova OV. Numinosity as a therapeutic factor: from symptom to symbol. *Psychotherapy Science Today*. 2(2):44–48. https://doi.org/10.64435/ftcs7951.

OPEN ACCESS

© Author(s), CC BY-NC 4.0

## Abstract

The article explores the symbol as a key mediator between the symptom and unconscious processes in analytic psychotherapy. The symptom is considered not only as a manifestation of psychopathology but also as a symbolic expression of intrapersonal conflict and traumatic experience. The multi-layered nature of the symbol, its connection with archetypal and cultural images, and its role in the redistribution of psychic energy accumulated in symptoms and complexes are analyzed. The processes of symbolization and the method of amplification are considered as tools for revealing unconscious meanings and integrating the personality. Using an illustrative clinical vignette with mythological amplification, it is demonstrated how the experience of a symbol activates processes of transformation and individuation, contributing to psychic development and the restoration of personality integrity.

**Keywords:** symbol, symptom, mythological amplification, individuation.

*The symbol itself is a bridge or connection between us and the mystery of existence; moreover, it expresses this connection through the images in which it is presented.*
D. Kalsched

From the perspective of depth psychology, a symptom represents a symbolically organized form of psychic adaptation through which unconscious conflicts, traumatic experiences, and developmental deficits find expression and temporary stabilization within the personality structure. It acts as a compromise solution between consciousness and the unconscious, between the individual's instinctual needs and the psychological and existential needs of the personality [1, 2].

Typically, symptoms are produced by emotionally charged groups of ideas (or complexes), the source of which lies in the deep layers of the unconscious. Some complexes acquire an autonomous character and are expressed through bodily functional disturbances, which clinically manifest as psychosomatic disorders or neuroses.

In the late 19th century, Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer suggested that neurotic symptoms (hysteria, certain types of pain, etc.) carry symbolic meaning. Like dreams, such symptoms are a form of expression of unconscious psychic processes and contain a certain symbolic load [3]. Thus, a patient encountering a psychologically unbearable situation (something that cannot be "digested") may develop a gastrointestinal symptom; a patient burdened by responsibility may develop back pain, etc. Therefore, a symptom can have symbolic significance, representing a particular case of the manifestation of a symbol. In this case, analytical work with the symbolic meaning of the symptom allows for the healing of the internal conflict, traumatic experiences, or other psychic contradictions that gave rise to the symptom. In many ethnic groups and cultures, ancient healing practices existed that included the analysis of symptom symbolism. An example of such a tradition is the ancient Greek Asclepieia — temples dedicated to Asclepius. To better understand the healing mechanism of working with symbols in psychotherapeutic practice, let us consider the nature of symbols.

Symbols are unique multi-level structures that connect the visible and the invisible. This concept is key to expressing ideas and realities not always amenable to verbal description. The etymology of this term reveals its unifying nature (symbol — "joined together" and "that which joins").

A symbol is "the best possible expression or formulation of something as yet unknown" [4].

* E-mail: kseniko@mail.ru.

Numerous attempts have been made in art, philosophy, and psychotherapy to comprehend the very concept of the symbol. As an independent aesthetic category, the symbol began to be considered at the end of the 18th century. Thus, J.W. Goethe and K.F. Moritz noted that the symbol must be distinguished from the image, the sign, and allegory. And G.W.F. Hegel returned to the concept of the symbol as a sign or image possessing meaning. Various ideas explaining the nature of the symbol were developed in the works of Schelling, Cassirer, Freud, Jung, Gadamer, Langer, and many other authors [5, 6].

C.G. Jung distinguishes between "natural" symbols and symbols introduced by culture. Regarding the origin of the former, he writes that they are infinite variations of basic archetypal images (their development can be traced by referring to the heritage of ancient cultures) [3, 7]. We can encounter these archetypal images when examining the cave paintings of ancient people, Egyptian hieroglyphic writing, or Sumerian cuneiform. Symbols introduced by culture ("cultural symbols") have undergone numerous metamorphoses and have become collective images, part of universal human culture. Contemplating these images, a person often encounters the numinous, experiencing a powerful emotional resonance. Cultural symbols can still carry within them an archaic beginning, the "divine," the "sacred."

Jung notes that modern man has become captive to his rationalism, which has disrupted his ability to perceive divine symbols and ideas, *"delivering him to the mercy of the psychic underworld"; "...the moral and spiritual tradition has disintegrated..., leading to disorientation and disunity."* [3]. The contact of modern man with nature has been interrupted, leading to the disappearance of the deep emotional (psychic) energy provided by this connection.

The process of symbolization is associated with the search for meaning and can become a valuable tool for a deep understanding of both intrapersonal and interpersonal processes, a kind of key to a deeper comprehension of reality. When we want to understand a symbol, we move from its external manifestation to its internal meaning. Each symbolic expression can provide access to new levels of understanding, making symbols inexhaustible in their meanings. Symbols represent a bridge between the material and the spiritual, the individual and the collective, allowing us to comprehend and interpret our experiences and ideas.

In analytical work, this movement from the external aspects of a symbol toward the search for an inner meaning that is not immediately apparent becomes especially valuable. Analysis develops the ability to find this "invisible" and, at first glance, non-obvious reality behind the visible shell. The nature of symbols is polysemantic and inexhaustible. Any symbol can be interpreted in different contexts, revealing new facets of meaning.

The primary task of analytic work is to understand and "decipher" the symbolic message contained in the symptom. In cases of recognizing and accepting the symbolic meaning of a symptom, the conflict material it expresses is brought to the level of consciousness. This process is associated with the redistribution of psychic energy, which was previously accumulated in complexes manifesting through symptoms. Then, symbols can play the role of a kind of "energy transformer" through which psychic energy, previously bound in symptoms, can be integrated into life. The movement from symptom to symbol represents an important part of psychotherapeutic (analytical) dynamics [8–10].

Analytical work is not only the process of interpreting and elucidating symbolic material, but also an exploration of meanings associated with feelings and emotions, traumas and experiences, individual history, and collective memory. In the therapeutic context, symbols enrich the perception of reality. To symbolize means to seek the meaning that lies behind a particular situation. This exploratory, symbolizing function of the psyche manifests not only in symptoms and dreams, but also within the therapeutic process itself. Therefore, it is crucial for the analyst to attend to symbolic messages. What does the patient's account of what he saw on the way to the session reveal about intrapsychic conflict? What do lateness, or conversely, the desire to begin the session a few minutes early, symbolize? What processes unfold in the patient's inner life when the therapist announces an upcoming vacation? What is symbolized, repeated, or reenacted, perhaps decades later?

Work with symbolic material is effective when symbols not only become meaningful but are also emotionally experienced [9]. Marie-Louise von Franz considered archetypal experiences as the central healing factor in psychotherapy. Following Jung, she noted that if an analyst does not strive to recognize archetypal content in dreams, they, on the one hand, fail to notice the depth, and on the other hand — miss a stunning opportunity, since according to Jung, "archetypal experiences are sent to us by the unconscious, and then they are manifestations of grace"; archetypal experiences "... cannot be artificially induced." [10].

To see more about the Katathym-Imaginative Psychotherapy approach, follow the link: https://igkip.org

## Illustrative clinical vignette based on a real therapy case of a patient with a fear of public speaking

***Anamnesis and symptoms***

Patient S., 35 years old, manager, sought therapy with a request to overcome a disabling fear of public speaking that was blocking his professional advancement. The symptom, manifested somatically (tremor, hyperhidrosis, muscle tension) and cognitively (ideas of self-deprecation), first crystallized in adolescence in a situation of systematic public criticism from a teacher. Despite academic success, the patient developed a stable association between the act of self-presentation before an audience and the existential risk of annihilation.

***Symbol dynamics and the therapeutic process***

Through the application of Katathymic-Imaginative Psychotherapy (Symboldrama),* the patient was asked to imagine fear in the form of any image his imagination would draw. The symptom was personified in a spontaneous image of a grotesque "Giantess,"** dominating the space and causing the patient to experience a state of regressive childhood terror. In the imaginal process, the patient envisioned himself as a small boy aged five to six. The figure of the "giantess" was constellated by the image of an authoritarian grandmother and was associated with a repressed childhood episode of humiliating coercion to perform publicly. Initial interpretation allowed linking the current fear with personal history, deconstructing projections onto authority figures.

A turning point in therapy occurred at the stage of archetypal amplification of this image. Rather than further analysis of personal trauma, the therapeutic focus was shifted to investigating the "Giantess" as a carrier of a universal mythological motif. Through reference to the cross-cultural mythologem of the the Devouring Mother (Kali, Baba Yaga), the patient was invited to consider his image in the context of an archetypal encounter with the numinous.

During guided imagery, the patient entered into a dialogue with the image. He found the strength to look at the "Giantess," overcoming his fear. Gradually, the image of the small boy began to change, and within the imagery the patient started to experience himself at his actual present age.

Suddenly, in the course of this interaction, the visual representation of the "Giantess" underwent a spontaneous transformation: her frightening features softened, and instead of a threatening gesture, a bundle of keys appeared in her hands. The keys were forged from metal, and some of them bore ancient inscriptions.

The patient reported a powerful ambivalent experience: overwhelming fear was replaced by a profound, almost sacred awe. He described it as an encounter not with a personal persecutor, but with an ancient, impersonal force that "does not so much want to destroy as to guard some ancient secret and is now capable of granting access to that secret."

The appearance of the keys points to the ambivalent nature of the Mother archetype: simultaneously destructive and generative, devouring and life-giving. This moment was described by the patient as the most significant and energetically charged experience of the entire therapy — a classic manifestation of numinous experience.

***Integration and transformation***

Subsequent analytical work was devoted to the integration of this experience. The keys were interpreted as a gift from the "Giantess," who no longer appeared as threatening or frightening to the patient. These keys symbolized new possibilities for the patient, indicating that the psychic energy previously bound in the traumatic symptom and the negative maternal complex was being released and made available for the process of individuation.

---

* Katathym-Imaginative Psychotherapy (Symboldrama) is a depth-oriented psychotherapeutic approach developed by the German psychotherapist Hanscarl Leuner in the 1950s based on ideas from psychoanalysis and Jungian psychology, in which unconscious material is revealed and processed through directed work with images and symbols in a state of katathymic imagination.

** The American psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim, in his work *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales,* suggests that this is precisely how young children perceive their parents — in the form of giants. In many fairy-tale plots, children defeat giants, become capable of outwitting them, and take possession of their resources (that is, they grow up, become big, become adults).

The patient began to spontaneously employ the metaphor of keys opening new doors to describe the presentation of new projects and the permission he gave himself to speak clearly, confidently, and with expressive freedom. The metaphor of keys recurred several times throughout the therapy: the key that can close something (renunciation of negative patterns and behavioral programs), the key that opens new possibilities, and the key as a resource — a key understood as a spring emerging from the ground.

***Follow-up***

Upon completion of the therapy course, the patient not only successfully handled work presentations but also voluntarily engaged in activities requiring public speaking. He reported that speeches ceased to be a battlefield where he was a victim and became a "meeting place" for exchange. The therapeutic process resulted not merely in symptom reduction, but in a shift in the patient's life position from a defensive to a proactive stance.

***Analytical commentary: working with the symbol, interventions and key emphases***

The presented case demonstrates the evolution of therapeutic work from the level of the personal unconscious (trauma) to the level of the collective unconscious (archetype), where genuine symbolic experience becomes possible. Key interventions that shifted the process into this plane can be identified:

Transition from image analysis to symbol amplification. As C.G. Jung emphasized, a symbol is not a sign denoting something known (such as the image of a trauma), but rather "the best possible expression of something yet unknown" (an archetype). Amplification extends personal material into the collective, providing fertile ground for a numinous experience.

- The symbol of the keys as a gift indicates the activation of the individuation process, wherein psychic energy is redirected from serving a complex (fear) toward serving the wholeness of the personality. The ambivalence of the numinous experience highlights the transcendent function of the symbol as a mediator between opposites.
- The numinous experience ("awe mingled with the sacred") represents the cornerstone of transformative experience. It possesses a healing potency in itself, as it directly connects the ego with archetypal energy.
- Integration through a "living" metaphor: the bundle of keys that opens doors to new possibilities. This corresponds to the Jungian understanding of the symbol as an energy transformer. A symbol does not merely signify; it acts within the psyche — redistributing energy. The patient began to utilize energy previously blocked in fear for creative self-expression, which exemplifies the aim of the analytic process: not adaptation through suppression, but transformation through integration.

Thus, the therapeutic effectiveness in this case was achieved not through working through the trauma (although this constituted a necessary foundation), but through a conscious focus on the symbol. The therapist created conditions in which a personal image, having undergone amplification, revealed itself as a window into the collective unconscious, allowing the patient to experience a numinous encounter. It was precisely this experience, rather than cognitive understanding, that became the catalyst for a profound reorientation of the psyche — from the patterns of the past (trauma) toward the potential of the future (individuation).

The living energy, healing power, and archaic potency of a symbol are released only through its holistic sensory-emotional experience. Symbols are categories of "condensation": a symbol "binds" within itself a whole series of associations, but in connection with the need for certainty, this irritates us, and in connection with the need for mystery and meaningfulness, it is experienced as a treasure [9].

The method of amplification* — is one of the key tools in Jungian psychology, allowing for a deeper understanding of personal symptoms by linking them to archetypal figures and mythological

* Mythological amplification is the clarification and clarification of individual images in dreams and products of visual creativity (drawings, painting, sculpture, sandplay, etc.) with the help of direct association and in accordance with the data of the humanities (symbolism, mythology, mysticism, folklore, history of religion, ethnology, etc.) [4].

narratives. Engaging with this material provides an opportunity to uncover deep psychological patterns and recognize their universal significance. The identification of the relevant myth constitutes the first step on this path. The next stage involves recognizing and interpreting the archetypal core of the symbolic meaning underlying both the symptom and the myth. It unites individual experiences and archetypal motifs and also becomes the basis for understanding the symptom and its roots. The final stage of this work is the return and application of the found, realized meaning in the individual's life, which promotes the integration of various aspects of the personality and is a necessary condition for achieving wholeness.

Through analytical work with symbolic material, not only current difficulties and internal obstacles arising on the path are revealed, but prospects and possibilities for development also become visible. The symbol unfolds the psyche in the direction of the future, both in the therapeutic process and in real life. Through the symbolic, the process of individuation is revealed. "The symbol remains an eternal challenge to our thoughts and feelings. Perhaps this explains the stimulating nature of symbolic work, why it captivates us so intensely" [7].

Thus, the transition from symptom to symbol in analytical work opens the way to genuine healing, allowing not simply to eliminate the manifestation of conflict but to integrate its energy into the integral structure of the personality. The symbol, being alive and multifaceted, contributes to the restoration of the subject's connection with the archetypal and deep layers of the psyche, overcoming the rupture caused by excessive rationalism. Through the emotional experience and amplification of symbolic material, the patient gains not only an understanding of their internal processes but also an orientation toward the future, revealing the potential for individuation. In this regard, the symbol remains an enduring source of meaning and transformation, reminding us that behind every symptom lies an impulse toward wholeness and the integration of the personality.

**References**


1. Roesler C. Theoretical foundations of analytical psychology: recent developments and controversies. J Anal Psychol. 2019;64(5):669–81. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5922.12540.
2. Калшед Д. Внутренний мир травмы: архетипические защиты личностного духа. М.: Когито-Центр; 2015.
3. Юнг КГ. Человек и его символы. М.: АСТ; 2020.
4. Araujo S. The symbol theory in S. Freud, C.G. Jung and C.S. Peirce. Int J Jungian Stud. 2017;9(2):92–105.
5. Зеленский ВВ. Толковый словарь по аналитической психологии. М.: Когито-Центр; 2008.
6. Jones R. Dialectics of sign and symbol and the utterance of archetype theory. J Anal Psychol. 2023;68(4):1–19. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5922.12942.
7. Юнг КГ. Архетип и символ. М.: Ренессанс; 1991.
8. Regovec M. Cogito Alchymicum. Zurich: Spring Journal Books; 2025.
9. Каст В. Динамика символов: основы юнгианской психотерапии. М.: Центр гуманитарных инициатив; 2020.
10. фон Франц МЛ. Кошка: сказка об освобождении феминности. М.: Класс; 2007.