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A Journey of Self-Actualization *A Psychological Perspective on Barfield's* *"This Ever Diverse Pair"*

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First Place Student Essay Award Winner

Abstract:

This paper presents a fresh analysis of one of Owen Barfield's most unique fictional works, the semi-autobiographical *This Ever Diverse Pair*. Viewed within the historical context of Barfield's period of practicing law, *This Ever Diverse Pair* contains evidence that the novel reflects Barfield's psychological development during that time. This paper reveals that possibility through character study and examination of specific episodes in the novel. The contrasting personalities of characters Burgeon and Burden and the conflict and resolution of their partnership are used to portray the work as a dichotomous representation of Barfield's personal growth, which is expressed in terms of Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs, especially the drive to self-actualize. Such an interpretation provides valuable insight into both the motive of Barfield as author and his personal experience during the trying middle epoch of his life.

A Journey of Self-Actualization: A Psychological Perspective on Barfield's *This Ever Diverse Pair*

This Ever Diverse Pair can certainly claim a unique position among the works of Owen Barfield. One of a very small number of works published while he worked as a lawyer, *This Ever Diverse Pair* was written largely in response to his professional experience. However, a richer understanding of the work can be grasped if we regard it as more than merely an enjoyable retelling of Barfield's adventures in the legal arena. Indeed, Barfield himself suggests a deeper importance to the work with the urgency he relates through the voice of the narrator. The intensely personal nature of the book almost begs a psychological examination of the characters and events of the novel. Such an approach may be greatly productive in giving the reader insight into the motives and struggles within Barfield that prompted his writing. I contend that *Pair* reflects the psychological tendencies described by Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs and the human desire for self-actualization in particular.

The title of *This Ever Diverse Pair* refers to the business partnership of the characters Burgeon and Burden in the legal services. Barfield provides ample evidence that the reader is to consider these two to be different aspects of a single personality, evidently that of Barfield himself. The shared experiences and conflicts of the pair provide most of the narrative substance of this work. However, the fact that Burgeon is narrator as well as pseudonym suggests Barfield's closer identification with Burgeon as a personal representative (Hunter 129). Barfield tended to describe people by identifying contrasting aspects of personality (Glyer 202). How natural, then, for him to use the same convention to depict his personal struggles in the tedious environment of the legal profession.

According to Burgeon, the encroachment of Burden's exigencies upon Burgeon's independence has forced the writing of the book: "I am doing it for my own salvation. Burden is eating me up, my time, my wit, my memory, my 'shaping spirit of imagination,' my whole *me*" (Burgeon 19). The character of Burden is always associated with the drudgeries of the office. He is practical, efficient, detached. The name itself refers to the encumbering necessities with which Burden is constantly occupied. He is, as Burgeon refers to him, "that animated ragbag of doubts and worries" (78). When attacked by Burgeon for being satisfied not in a desire for justice but in convenience and acquisition, Burden protests, "There's no reason why I shouldn't enjoy getting properly paid" (79). At times, Burden even appears to be rude and grasping, but he sustains a narrow dedication to completing his work with excellence. As Burgeon comments, "He knows the rules and keeps well within them, so he is safe" (102).

The character Burden could be described as motivated by what Maslow categorizes as the deficiency needs of man, or those caused by basic physical and emotional human requirements. These needs include instinctual physiological needs, needs for safety and security, social needs, and needs to be valued and esteemed. Throughout the novel, Burden behaves as we would expect one driven by these deficiency needs. The instinct for physical survival and personal security impel his slavish dedication to toil in order to provide sustenance and shelter for himself. His esteem needs are fulfilled through his dedication to quality and intense satisfaction in his accomplishments in the legal field. His professional and social relations allow him to feel he belongs in a community. Although only Burgeon is described as having family relationships, the deficiency needs as a whole can be associated most accurately with the character Burden.

If, according to Maslow's theory, Burden's aims can be defined according to the deficiency needs of man, then Burgeon's actions can be conversely identified with growth needs, specifically the desire for self-actualization. One who self-actualizes is spontaneous, creative, and ethical; he or she has a certain "freshness of appreciation" and awareness of beauty and reality. This process is motivated by a desire to grow and expand one's perspective and, instead of merely coping with the environment, understand and transcend it (Reber). Burgeon's name, like Burden's, guides readers toward an understanding of his personality as being prompted by desires to grow and create. Barfield confirms this apprehension of Burgeon's motivation in several examples. While Burden goes to sleep in a crowded hall, Burgeon spends his moments in philosophical speculation about the character and personality that would make an ideal solicitor (Burgeon 90). When Burden is occupied with legal details with a young mother, Burgeon admires the delicate beauty of her baby (75). Burgeon delights in writing poetry, is sensitive to nature, and has a finely developed moral and religious sense. According to Maslow, all these are evidentiary traits of a self-actualizing individual. The essence of self-actualizing is reaching one's highest potential, and any steps toward this full personal development that occur in *This Ever Diverse Pair* are taken almost exclusively by Burgeon.

The tension between Burden and Burgeon in the novel can be attributed to their imbalance of needs. Burden, who was, as Burgeon calls it, "summoned" by Burgeon to aid his legal work, has begun to demand more and more of Burgeon's attentions until Burgeon's very existence is threatened (14). This scenario is consistent with the extension of Maslow's theory that if one's deficiency needs are in jeopardy of being unmet, any higher-level needs will be ignored if the energies expended pursuing those needs are required for survival. Burgeon, who is merely meant to be a "sleeping partner" in this arrangement, occupied with higher matters while Burden is concerned with routine labor, is forced to attend to every interruption and every inconvenience Burden encounters (17). Burgeon continues to attempt to self-actualize but is frustrated at nearly every opportunity.

His poetry, for example, is twisted into a clever coping mechanism as Burden asks for poetry written about his trials at work. Burgeon laments, "That's the sort of thing he does – calls on me to exert the very abilities he is destroying" (19). When Burgeon seizes a moment to walk by the river and enjoy the beauty of the day, Burden is "fidgeting all the time to get back to the Office" while Burgeon exclaims, "Look at the sunlight on the river! If you half-shut your eyes and look *at* it, it looks as if the sky were raining stars. They keep breaking and forming up and breaking again on the surface of the water" (36-37). However, Burgeon finds that these moments of transcendence grow scarcer, as he says, with Burden's "expecting me to lend my vast creative powers to the task of helping him run his horrid little squabbles" (84).

Furthermore, Burgeon's self-actualization through moral awareness is particularly attacked and stunted by Burden's pragmatism. After a great amount of effort is wasted on a certain case that is resolved amicably, Burgeon still feels "happy" and argues, "Let it suffice that it was our duty, and we have done it. Results are irrelevant" (88). He pontificates about the glory and eternal significance of doing one's duty until Burden interjects, "Anyway, thank goodness there's a nice fat trust-fund behind us to get the costs from!" (88) Such slighting of Burgeon's lofty idealism is quite common. When Burgeon objects to the casual attitude of society and especially the court system toward divorce and adultery, Burden silences him. Later, Burgeon discloses, "I . . . held my peace – as I always do" (34). Burgeon protests afterward in private, only to be met with an exasperated outburst from Burden: "Just when things are going comfortably for once . . . you must start muscling in and pulling this ethical stuff. Go on looking

at the river. Why don't you write a poem about it? That's your job. You would have done once – or tried to" (38). Burgeon truthfully replies, "What you *really* want me to write is not about the river at all, but doggerel about you and your troubles" (38). Burgeon's self-actualizing needs are simply going unmet as Burden's deficiency needs stifle his efforts for personal growth.

Still, Burgeon heroically strives for a compromise between the pair in the poems he writes by presenting the viewpoint of both partners. However, any unity they realize happens only momentarily in the crucible of difficult shared experiences. This temporary bond does not survive the increasing domination of Burgeon by Burden's demands, and the pair's relationship reaches a crisis. After an earnest debate in which Burgeon accuses his partner of manipulation through deceit (as Burden calls it, a "tactical ruse"), Burgeon sums up his frustration with Burden's loyalty to the petty legal system and, by extension, to the relentless demands of his deficiency needs: "God, what a way for a man that stands upright between earth and sky to use the spirit that is in him!" (107-108).

Burgeon's ever-repressed need for self-actualization violently revolts, only to find that Burden successfully controlled the effects of his outburst. Burden threatens to kill him, but "not now, not violently. It will be gradual. I've begun already, as you know very well" (112). The full extent of the parasitical attack of Burden's deficiency needs on Burgeon is finally revealed. One might argue that Burden could survive without Burgeon and even self-actualize to an extent in the area of cognitive growth. The question, however, is not whether Burden could exist without Burgeon but whether Barfield would. Both partners' need-fulfilling contributions are indispensable in Barfield's development toward maximum potential. Thus, the elimination of Burgeon would not remediate Barfield's personal crisis.

The occurrences of what Maslow defines as peak experiences, however, are always potent catalysts in an individual's progress toward self-actualization. These episodes usually involve a sense of well-being, an affirmation of the value of existence, and a sense of purpose, unity, and integration; they also leave the individual changed for the better. A full reconciliation of Burden and Burgeon would seem to require such a dynamic event, and the turning point of the book, one of Burgeon's dreams, could easily be categorized as a peak experience. In this dream, Burgeon finds himself and Burden on trial, not for a crime but for temperament and motives. Burden is found to be overly materialistic and centered on security. He is sentenced to live with a family, creating stories for the children and enjoying the arts and literature, devoted now to self-actualizing needs instead of deficiency needs. Burgeon is criticized for being lofty in mind and inconstant in will; he is sentenced merely to continue in his legal profession. This reconciling and purpose-giving peak experience drastically changes the relationship between Burden and Burgeon.

After this dramatic judgment, both characters are able to understand one another and collaborate constructively in their partnership. This beneficial relationship is not simply a resolution of Barfield's personality; both characters remain unique, and Barfield, as is his wont, continues to describe himself by both of them. The key to understanding this resolution is the awareness that these two characters, while focused on fulfilling diverse needs, represent a single man. As the pair's judge in the dream says, "Our task is to consider what is needed by the whole man in order to make him truly whole" (136). The pair's newfound harmony, then, results from a correct balance and prioritizing of needs that will enable Barfield's full self-actualization. Burgeon becomes more than a sleeping partner and is able to self-actualize while accepting the necessity of the constraints of the office, willingly contributing his services to assist Burden. On the other hand, Burden no longer attempts to smother Burgeon's growth needs or bend them to

his own use. Burgeon is able to maximize his ability when his pursuit of higher needs is reconciled to the deficiency needs of Burden; when the two partners are in balance, they can achieve wholeness and fully self-actualize.

The tension of needs seen in these characters can helpfully be attributed to Barfield himself as author. His identification with Burgeon shows his creative and moral interest that he, no doubt, felt was being stifled by the demands of his occupation. However, this legal work was necessary to meet his basic needs of survival and security, even though he evidently resented those needs' impositions upon his imaginative life. Barfield's detestation of what he called a "colorless" world of industry and business can be seen in poems such as "Bad Day," written during the same period in his life (qtd. in Tennyson xix). Like Burgeon, Barfield found that the more he sought self-actualization, the more his creative and moral energies were consumed in meeting deficiency needs. One can imagine this conflict causing Barfield to reach a point of crisis similar to that related in the book. Perhaps he found his resolution, as Burgeon found his "salvation," in the self-actualizing act of writing *This Ever Diverse Pair* (Burgeon 19). This cathartic self-examination, or perhaps some other peak experience, would have enabled him to assess his attitudes and desires and to achieve a balance of needs allowing him to self-actualize while continuing to work, as he would for nine years following the publication of *This Ever Diverse Pair*, until Burden finally retired and Barfield was able to resume writing as a full-time pursuit.

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