

Shadowplay

(THE MASKS OF THE PLAY)¹

Sean Arthur Joyce

“Shadow-maker create me everywhere
Dark spaces (your face is my chosen abyss)
For I said I have come to possess your darkness,
Only this.”

—Gwendolyn MacEwen, *The Shadow Maker*²

“I gave you many names and masks
And longed for you in a hundred forms
And I was warned the masks would fall
And the forms would lose their fame
And I would be left with an empty name.”

—Gwendolyn MacEwen, *The Return*³

“The mask is the essence of all metamorphoses,
with which man reaches reality on a higher plane.”

—Walter Sorell⁴

Shadowplay. Giant oak flexes a shadow self across cracked pavement. The sun’s echo of itself. Chemise of wind, flickering just out of eyereach. The sidewalk so many lines crossing dimensions. Children know this intuitively. Skip, skip, skip. ‘Step on a crack, break your mother’s back.’ The spell they use to stay in Magic Time. “You’re not mad, the old man said. You’re a poet.”⁵

Gwendolyn in her emerald robes, softly singing: “Shadow-maker create me everywhere.”⁶ Caught in the poet’s half-light, falling into the sliver of shadow between darkness and day. And Gilgamesh, diving into Creation’s watery underworld, searching for the Masks of God, the Elixir of Everlasting Fame. Crawling onto the shores of morning, we salvage a dream from the wreckage. Unsure how much of the otherworld has clung to us. Shadows dripping from our fingertips like Crow feathers. The Oversoul whispering clues millennia old. Ageless, yet still waiting to be born.

Shadowmaker, shapeshifter—morphing from Cedar Woman to Bear to Crow. Cloud shadow falling across one side of your face. Half-human, half-god—half-mask that separates us from ecstasy. Valley of Shadows where Creation begins in the speckled interplay between worlds. “When you build your temple,” the Annunaki gods warned, “You neglect the Shadow altar to your peril.”

“The dust becomes you,” they will say. Dust will be the colour of your skin, your face, your mask. Autumn clouds drained of sky. Check your eyes. The light should be dancing, the shadows nimble. In the beginning was the void, formless and deep. ⁷ Light danced into Being and the shadows fled. Until Irkalla Queen of Shadows begged for them to return. ⁸ Without darkness, she had no one to tell stories to, no ephemeral children to sing to sleep at her feet.

Shadowplay. The moon in full blood. Spectral fingers reach down to lift ocean’s pearl-embroidered quilt. Bluefin, swordfish, and shark prowl the skull’s fetid bowl. Hatreds pucker, puffballs spitting their dry, seedy curses. Half-formed fetuses curl, waiting for the watery kiss of life from your mouth. You love their gopherlike faces budding in the moonlight but somehow never fancied yourself a gardener. A generation comes and a generation goes. But there’s a third generation—the unborn. Shadow souls, watching to see how we’ll do without them. I am not just a Human Being, I am a Human Becoming. “It is hard to follow one great vision in this world of darkness and of many changing shadows,” Black Elk warned. “Among these shadows men get lost.” ⁹

Shadow-mask, cat’s paw sleek. Which is mask and which is face? ¹⁰ When did they become one? And why didn’t I notice until it was too late? Is it too late? How long has it been since I could laugh from the belly? How long since I threw my arms around someone who cried and wept with them? How long since I danced—not shit-faced drunk but high just for being in a body? “The shadows become you,” they will say. Shadow-dancer keep me moving through the ash leaves of the dark—keep me dancing even as I weep.

Shadowplay. The line between greasepaint and skin, long ago melded into one. “You have noticed,” said Black Elk, “that the truth comes into this world with two faces. One is sad with suffering, and the other laughs; but it is the same face...” ¹¹ Mirrors a trick to remind you, who stares back depends on where you stand. The glass a pool of mercury. Ready to shift at the nudge of a startled heartbeat. Make-up another word for mask. Beautiful is as beautiful does. “Everyone is a moon, and has a dark side which he never shows to anybody.” ¹² Sin the Moon

God paints Mesopotamia with his light, but only exposes his half-face. The Gemini girls bicker, picking at each other with yellowing fingernails. The Self flinches nervously. This will require some blood. No doubt about it.

SUBTEXT & FOOTNOTES

1. 'The masks of the play', from *Persona*, a Latin word meaning just that. Another term, *personâré*, according to Skeat's *Concise Etymological Dictionary*, carries the implication further: "To sound through; the large-mouthed mask of the actor was named from the voice sounding through it." Both terms were derived from the practice in Greek chorus plays of having actors play several parts simultaneously by using masks held up to the face. Interestingly, the English words 'person' and 'personality' are based on these Latin terms.
2. Excerpted from the collection *The Shadow Maker*, by Gwendolyn MacEwen, 1969 (1972 MacMillan ed.).
3. *The Shadow Maker*, *ibid.*
4. *The Other Face: The Mask in the Arts*, by Walter Sorell (Thames and Hudson, 1973).
5. This is an actual anecdote from the biography of Canadian poet Susan Musgrave, who was told this during a brief stay in the psych ward of a hospital.
6. *The Shadow Maker*, by Gwendolyn MacEwen, 1969.
7. Genesis 1:2.
8. Irkalla or Ereshkigal was Queen of the Shadows, goddess of the Sumerian Underworld. The Annunaki gods are described in Sumerian creation mythology (c.3500-4000 BC) as being the divine offspring of Sky Father Anu and Mother Goddess Mammutu. Their progeny includes numerous gods and demigods, including Shamash the Sun God, Sîn the Moon God, Enki the Wise (Ea of the Waters), Enlil the Storm God, etc.
9. *Black Elk Speaks*, University of Nebraska Press, 1989 reprint. The words of Black Elk as written by ethnologist John G. Neihardt, first published in 1932.
10. Relevant quotes on the subject must include Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who wrote: "When the mask falls, man becomes revealed," and that great contrarian, Oscar Wilde, who believed, "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person—give him a mask and he will tell the truth." I'm with Rousseau. In one of my early notebooks I wrote: "When the mask falls, the truth is revealed."
11. *Black Elk Speaks*, *ibid.*
12. *Pudd'nhead Wilson's New Calendar*, by Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens).