



Creating Space for the Experiences of the Non-understandable from wisdom of the Senex-Puer

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As a Jungian or a psychotherapist who applies Jungian principles in contemporary times, the tension between solving a client’s problems in a timely manner and allowing the psyche to be prepared for transcendence is unavoidable. Like most licensed mental health clinicians, my clinical training was also primarily focused on cognitive behavioral therapy as a licensure requirement. Today, evidence-based practice has become the gold standard, and is endorsed by professional associations and insurance providers. Quantitative study and randomized controlled trials have dominated the research field. However, I answer the calling of my heart by pursuing training in the Jungian approach. As I learn more about the symbolic work and Jung’s theories as well as evidence-based techniques, it appears that these different approaches may benefit from each other. How might a marriage between these two approaches look?

I have been searching for potential answers in the wisdom of archetypes. In this context, I found study of the Senex-Puer archetype relevant and promising. James Hillman’s (2015) work on the Senex-Puer archetype provides a way to examine these two poles in clinical work: only focusing on problem solving and thinking versus exclusively working at the level of the unconscious.

Senex and Puer stand for old man and youth in Latin. Senex personifies tradition, structure, authority and is related to ego-formation; while Puer represents the power of idealism, invention, and immediacy, and is related to transcendent spiritual powers. According to Hillman, the Senex and Puer duality are involved in every complex. Also, both poles of archetype, Senex and Puer, are equal and necessary while both of them have negative and positive qualities.

Senex	Puer
<div>1. Orientation</div> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Anchored in tradition, professionalism, and the ethics of care• Prioritizes measurable goals, structure, and accountability• Views the client’s psyche as something to stabilize and strengthen	<div>1. Orientation</div> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Spark of inspiration, always in movement, avoiding being stagnated• Vertical emphasis on reaching higher, thinking beyond limitations• Attuned to possibility and what’s potential• Sees therapy as a space for becoming, not just fixing
<div>2. Clinical Approach</div> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Evidence-based modalities (CBT, DBT, etc.)• Emphasis on diagnosis, symptom relief, and treatment planning• Encourages ego-strengthening and behavioral change	<div>2. Clinical Approach</div> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Thinking beyond what’s generally acceptable, curiosity• the desire for reaching for something higher; a kind of idealism; the ability to think outside of conventional limitation• Welcomes the mystery of the unknown
<div>3. Strengths</div> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provides consistency, clarity, and a secure frame• Helps clients organize thoughts and regulate emotions• Protects against chaos and reactivity	<div>3. Strengths</div> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inspires creativity, hope, and inner freedom• Opens the client to new visions of self and future• It can validates depth and existential questions
<div>4. Shadow Side</div> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can become rigid, over-reliant on protocols• May pathologize imaginative or symbolic experience• Risk of overemphasizing control and productivity	<div>4. Shadow Side</div> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• May resist grounding or deny practical limits• Can idealize healing or bypass pain with transcendence• Risks losing the client to abstraction or spiritual inflation
<div>5. Senex as a Guide</div> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Upholds professional standards with maturity• Offers containment so deeper layers can emerge when ready	<div>5. Puer as a Companion</div> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Invites wonder, play, and soulful exploration• Helps clients access healing through meaning, not just method

They are negative when they lose connection with each other. The possession of Senex leads to coldness and dryness; Puer without Senex leads to omnipotence fantasies and dissolution. Senex leads the research and clinical practice to a rigid path of numbers and definitions, without creativity and warmth. On the other hand, Puer pushes the field to the realm of spiritual detachment and fantasy without adequate boundaries and reality checks. Nowadays, almost every therapist claims that they follow an integrative approach. The dialogue between Senex and Puer can provide deeper insights for this task. This unending dialogue is the process of creating meaning in clinical work. Psychotherapy is a science that is fueled by Senex with discipline, and is also an art that is played by Puer with creativity. The archetypal healing and the wholeness occur when we are able to better balance the both poles of the Senex-Puer archetype. With the wisdom of the Senex-Puer archetype, we are able to embrace positive Senex power to confidently support clients doing their ego work, and by doing so, we create space for the experiences of the non-understandable where Puer can freely explore.

Reference
Hillman, J. (Ed.). (2005). Senex and puer (Rev. ed., Vol. 3). Spring Publications.

