

The Failed Integration of Persona and Shadow in Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance*

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Abstract:

This study examines the failure of integration between persona and shadow as reflected in the characters of Elisabeth Sparkle and Sue in Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance*. The research applies Carl Gustav Jung's theory of persona, shadow, and the process of individuation to analyze how psychological imbalance can lead to identity fragmentation, moral collapse, and loss of agency. The data are drawn from selected dialogues and scenes in the film script. The findings indicate that Elisabeth's refusal to recognize Sue as a part of herself, along with Sue's position as a shadow that refuses to respect the required balance and continually seeks dominance without restraint, results in psychological division rather than wholeness. Instead of achieving integration, the repression of the shadow leads to destruction. Ultimately, the film presents a tragic portrayal of what happens when a person clings too tightly to a social mask and refuses to confront the hidden aspects of the self.

Keywords: Persona, Shadow, Jung, Identity Fragmentation, Moral Collapse

INTRODUCTION

In modern media culture, identity is often shaped by external validation and social visibility. This condition creates psychological pressure when individuals become overly attached to socially constructed images and reject aspects of themselves that do not fit public expectations. In Jung's analytical psychology, persona refers to the social mask constructed to meet society's demands, described as "a compromise between individual and society as to what a man should appear to be" (Jung, 1968). Behind it lies the shadow, which contains rejected and suppressed traits that threaten the persona's image (Adamski, 2011). Jung explains that individuation requires the integration of conscious and unconscious elements; when this integration fails, inner conflict intensifies (Jung, 1968). Thus, psychological balance can only be achieved through the integration of persona and shadow, not through denial.

Recent studies connect persona-shadow dynamics with identity crisis in contemporary culture. Adamski (2021) argues that over-attachment to socially constructed identities leads to imbalance, while Stein (2021) notes that the shadow gains strength when continuously denied. In media environments that reward perfection and visibility, identity becomes increasingly performative (Becker, 2022). Research on female aging and visibility in cinema shows how beauty standards shape self-worth (McMillan, 2023), and social comparison significantly affects body image (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2021). Studies on identity disturbance and agency also emphasize that fragmentation and dependency may weaken autonomy (Karterud & Kongerslev, 2022; Aggarwal & Singh, 2024). However, these studies largely focus on socio-cultural or relational aspects and rarely examine the failed integration of persona and shadow within a single character.

This gap highlights the need for a Jungian psychological analysis of *The Substance*. In the film, Elisabeth Sparkle reflects what Jung (1953) calls over-identification with the persona. Her creation of Sue represents the separation of suppressed fears and insecurities, illustrating Jung's warning that what is repressed will return with greater intensity (Jung, 1968). Therefore, this study aims to analyze how the failure to integrate persona and shadow leads to identity fragmentation, moral collapse, and loss of agency. It is expected that this research contributes to Jungian literary criticism by demonstrating the importance of psychological integration in confronting social expectations and identity construction in contemporary media.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method to analyze the psychological conflict presented in *The Substance*. The research focuses on examining Jung's concepts of persona, shadow, and individuation in order to answer the central question of how the failed integration of these aspects is reflected through Elisabeth Sparkle and Sue. The primary data are taken from selected scenes and dialogues in Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance*, while secondary data are obtained from books, journals, and other academic sources discussing Jungian psychology.

The process of data analysis involves collecting relevant references, carefully reading and identifying significant dialogues and scenes, interpreting them using Jung's theoretical framework, and comparing them with related scholarly discussions. The selected quotations are then analyzed and presented in the discussion section, and all sources used in this study are listed in the

references.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Identity Fragmentation

Based on the data analysis, the first finding shows that the failed integration between persona and shadow in *The Substance* appears through identity fragmentation. This fragmentation happens when Elisabeth no longer experiences Sue as a part of herself, but as a separate figure who gradually replaces her position. Instead of recognizing Sue as an extension of her own psyche, Elisabeth begins to see her as someone else who lives the life she desires. One of the clearest examples can be seen in the following dialogue:

Data 1

Oliver: "Hey, what about a drink at my place tonight? Come on, don't be shy. I see you standing behind the door there, gorgeous. All right, take your time, but it's a date. You know, pump it up." (Act 34, Scene 1)

The quotation occurs when Oliver comes to the apartment and assumes he is speaking to Sue. At this moment, the person standing behind the door is actually Elisabeth. However, she does not correct him or reveal herself. The phrase "gorgeous" shows that Oliver directs admiration toward the younger image he believes is Sue. Elisabeth remains silent, which suggests that she does not feel confident enough to claim that attention for herself. Her silence is not accidental. It reflects hesitation and emotional withdrawal. Although she is physically present, she allows Sue's identity to stand in her place.

This reaction shows that Elisabeth has started to distance herself from her own sense of identity. She no longer feels secure occupying the role of a desirable woman. Instead, she accepts that Sue represents that version of herself. The moment illustrates how her identity begins to split into two separate positions: the admired figure and the hidden self. From a Jungian perspective, this separation indicates a failure to integrate persona and shadow. Rather than acknowledging Sue as part of her own psyche, Elisabeth unconsciously treats her as someone else. As Jung (1968) explains, when elements of the self are denied, they gain independent power. In this case, Elisabeth's silence becomes the first clear sign that her psychological unity is breaking, and that Sue is gradually replacing her in the social space she once occupied. This condition reflects identity disturbance, where individuals experience instability in self-definition (Karterud & Kongerslev, 2022). When the persona becomes disconnected from the authentic self, fragmentation becomes more visible.

Another example appears during Sue's audition:

Data 2

Casting Director: "Looks like everything sure is in the right place this time... Please say your name, age, measurements."

Sue: "I'm Sue." (Act 9, Scene 2)

The quotation occurs during Sue's audition, when she is evaluated mainly through physical standards. The casting director's statement, "everything sure is in the right place," shows that her value is measured by appearance rather than personality or experience. When Sue confidently says, "I'm Sue," she presents herself as fully aligned with the expectations of the industry. At this moment, the system that once assessed Elisabeth now accepts Sue without hesitation. The younger body becomes the new standard of desirability, while Elisabeth's presence is no longer central.

From a Jungian perspective, this scene reflects how the persona is shaped by social expectations. Jung (1968) explains that the persona is formed as a response to collective demands, meaning that individuals adjust themselves to fit what society rewards. In this case, Sue becomes the embodiment of that social mask. Instead of integrating her fear of aging and insecurity, Elisabeth allows those denied aspects to separate from her conscious identity. This separation strengthens the gap between persona and shadow, contributing further to the fragmentation of her sense of self. In contemporary media culture, physical appearance often becomes the central measure of value, reinforcing persona construction (Becker, 2022). This social reinforcement strengthens the split between external image and internal identity.

The division becomes even more explicit in the reminder given earlier in the film:

Data 3

Voice: "The one and only thing not to forget. You are one. You can't escape from yourself." (Act 5, Scene 1)

The quotation appears as an early reminder about the rules of the substance. The sentence "You are one" clearly states that Elisabeth and Sue are not separate individuals, but parts of the same entity. The phrase "You can't escape from yourself" emphasizes that no transformation can truly remove one's original identity. This warning functions as a direct statement about unity. However, even though the message is clear, Elisabeth does not fully accept its meaning. She continues to treat Sue as a solution to her insecurity rather than as a part of her own psyche. The reminder is explicit, yet her actions contradict it.

From a Jungian perspective, this moment highlights the importance of integration. Jung (1968) explains that psychological wholeness can only be achieved when conscious and unconscious elements are united. The warning in this scene reflects that principle. However, Elisabeth attempts to separate herself from the parts she dislikes, especially her fear of aging and loss of relevance. By trying to escape those aspects, she ignores the reality that they belong to her. As a result, the unity that should exist between persona and shadow breaks down. This failure to accept that "you are one" becomes the foundation of her identity fragmentation and later psychological collapse. Individuation requires recognition of unity within the self (Mayer & Maree, 2020). Elisabeth's refusal to accept this unity marks the beginning of her psychological disintegration.

2. Moral Collapse

The second consequence of failed integration is moral collapse. This does not happen suddenly. It develops slowly, through rationalization and emotional detachment.

Elisabeth expresses dissatisfaction with the balance system:

Data 4

Elisabeth: "This balance is not working. I barely have any time to enjoy myself while she wastes seven days stuffing her face in front of the TV." (Act 47)

The quotation occurs when Elisabeth begins to realize that Sue no longer respects the balancing system. At this moment, Elisabeth expresses frustration and disappointment. The sentence "this balance is not working" shows that she feels the arrangement has become unfair. The word "she" refers to Sue, which indicates that Elisabeth now speaks about Sue as if she is a separate individual. This separation reflects emotional distance. Elisabeth feels that while Sue continues to exceed the time limit and enjoy public attention, she is left with a deteriorating body. Every time Sue delays the switch, Elisabeth loses more of her beauty and vitality. As a result, she feels that her remaining time and attractiveness are being taken away from her.

This situation reflects moral collapse because the original agreement based on balance and mutual survival is no longer respected. Elisabeth begins to see the system not as a shared responsibility, but as a competition over time and beauty. Her frustration grows into resentment. From a Jungian perspective, when the shadow is not properly integrated, conflict arises between conscious identity and repressed impulses (Jung, 1959). Sue's desire for dominance and constant enjoyment represents unchecked shadow energy, while Elisabeth's fear of losing beauty weakens her ability to make firm decisions. Instead of restoring balance, both become trapped in selfish motivations. The moral boundary that once held them together slowly erodes, showing how failed integration leads to ethical and psychological breakdown. Moral disengagement often begins with rationalization and emotional distancing (Brown & Langford, 2020). Elisabeth's language shows how separation from responsibility allows resentment to grow.

Another important moment appears when Elisabeth is given the chance to stop the entire process:

Data 5

Elisabeth: "No. No, no, no. I can't stop. She just— The balance just needs to be respected." (Act 54)

The quotation occurs when Elisabeth is given a clear opportunity to end the entire process and return to her normal life. At this moment, she is fully aware that the situation has become harmful. However, her repeated "No" shows panic and resistance rather than confidence. The phrase "I can't stop" indicates dependence. Even though she has the authority to end it, she feels unable to do so. Instead of choosing to stop, she shifts the focus to the idea that "the balance just needs to be respected." This statement sounds rational, but it also functions as self-justification. Elisabeth convinces herself that the problem is not the substance itself, but the failure to follow the rules.

This moment reflects moral collapse because Elisabeth prioritizes maintaining the illusion over protecting herself. She knows that Sue has violated the balance and that her own body continues to suffer. Yet she refuses to end the process. From a Jungian perspective, when a person becomes over-identified with the persona, the ego loses the strength to confront the shadow directly (Jung, 1968). Elisabeth is no longer making decisions based on well-being, but on fear of losing the ideal image represented by Sue. Her insistence on "respecting the balance" hides her deeper anxiety about aging and irrelevance. Instead of reclaiming control, she chooses denial. This refusal to stop marks a turning point where moral awareness weakens, and psychological dependence becomes stronger. Self-justification is a common mechanism in moral collapse, where individuals reinterpret harmful actions as necessary or reasonable (Tomasini, 2022).

Another example appears when Sue delays switching:

Data 6

Sue: "Just one more day and then I have a whole week off. We can switch." (Act 52)

The quotation occurs when Sue asks for additional time before switching back to Elisabeth. The phrase "just one more day" sounds simple and harmless, but it minimizes the seriousness of the situation. Sue presents the delay as something temporary and reasonable. By saying "we can switch" afterward, she creates the impression that the balance will eventually be restored. However, in reality, every extra day weakens Elisabeth's body and shortens her remaining time. The calm tone of the sentence contrasts with the real consequences of her decision.

This moment reflects moral collapse because Sue knowingly places her own enjoyment above the agreed rules. She rationalizes the violation as a small extension, even though she understands the damage it causes. From a Jungian perspective, the shadow often seeks immediate gratification without considering long-term effects (Jung, 1959). Sue's request shows how unchecked desire slowly overrides responsibility. The repeated delays normalize the breaking of boundaries, and ethical awareness becomes less important than personal satisfaction. Through this gradual justification, the failure of integration deepens, and the moral structure that once maintained balance continues to deteriorate. Gradual boundary violation normalizes unethical behavior, especially when immediate gratification overrides long-term consequences (Stein, 2021).

Through these data, moral collapse appears not as sudden evil, but as gradual erosion of ethical awareness.

3. Loss of Agency

The final and most tragic result of failed integration is loss of agency. Elisabeth gradually loses control over her own existence.

Data 7

Voice: "You are the Matrix. If you are not satisfied, you can put an end to the experience and go back to being just you on your own. Would you like to stop?" (Act 54)

The quotation appears when Elisabeth is clearly informed that she still has full control over the process. The sentence "You

are the Matrix” emphasizes that she is the source and the center of the experience. She is reminded that the power to continue or to stop lies entirely in her hands. The question “Would you like to stop?” directly offers her agency and freedom of choice. This moment is important because it confirms that Elisabeth is not trapped by force. She is given a conscious opportunity to end the transformation and return to her original self.

However, despite this clear option, Elisabeth does not choose to stop. Her hesitation shows that she has become psychologically dependent on the existence of Sue. From a Jungian perspective, when the ego fails to integrate the shadow, it can lose its authority over the personality (Jung, 1968). Elisabeth’s identity has become so attached to the ideal image represented by Sue that she no longer trusts her own original self. Even though she is told she can “go back to being just you,” she cannot accept that version of herself anymore. This moment marks the loss of agency, not because control is taken away from her, but because she willingly surrenders it. Her inability to choose independence demonstrates how the failed integration of persona and shadow ultimately weakens her sense of autonomy. Loss of agency often appears when identity becomes dependent on external validation (Aggarwal & Singh, 2024). Elisabeth’s hesitation shows psychological dependency rather than autonomy.

The most painful example appears near the end:

Data 8

Elisabeth: “Okay. I can’t do this. I need you. I need myself... You’re the only lovable part of me. You have to come back.” (Act 95)

The quotation appears near the end of the film, when Elisabeth reaches an emotional breaking point. The sentence “I can’t do this” shows exhaustion and helplessness. She admits that she is unable to continue living in her current state. When she says, “I need you. I need myself,” it reveals confusion in her sense of identity. The two statements overlap, as if she no longer knows where she ends and Sue begins. The most striking line is “You’re the only lovable part of me.” This confession indicates deep self-rejection. Elisabeth no longer sees value in her original self. Instead, she believes that only the younger and more desirable version deserves love and acceptance.

This moment clearly reflects the loss of agency. Elisabeth does not speak as someone in control, but as someone dependent and desperate. From a Jungian perspective, when the shadow overtakes the ego, the individual may lose the ability to maintain a stable sense of self (Jung, 1968). Elisabeth’s plea shows that she has surrendered her autonomy to the image she once created. Rather than integrating Sue as part of her personality, she elevates Sue above herself. By declaring that Sue is the “only lovable part,” she erases her own worth. This final confession demonstrates the tragic outcome of failed integration: the self becomes divided to the point that one part dominates completely, leaving the other powerless and unable to stand alone. Identity fragmentation can result in diminished self-worth and emotional instability (Karterud & Kongerslev, 2022). When one aspect of the self dominates completely, personal agency weakens.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of selected dialogues and scenes in *The Substance* (2024), it can be concluded that Elisabeth Sparkle’s character clearly reflects the failure to integrate persona and shadow within her psychological structure. The findings show that this failure does not occur instantly, but develops gradually as Elisabeth becomes increasingly attached to her social image and increasingly detached from her authentic self. Through the presence of Sue as a younger and more desirable version, the film illustrates how the persona is externalized while the shadow gains autonomy. Instead of recognizing Sue as part of her own psyche, Elisabeth treats her as both a solution and a rival, which results in inner division rather than wholeness.

The study reveals that this failed integration is expressed through identity fragmentation, moral collapse, and loss of agency. Elisabeth’s silence when mistaken for Sue, her acceptance of Sue’s dominance in social spaces, and her confusion about her own worth indicate that her sense of identity becomes unstable. At the same time, the breaking of the balancing system shows how ethical awareness gradually weakens. Both Elisabeth and Sue begin to rationalize harmful actions, prioritizing beauty, pleasure, and visibility over responsibility. This gradual erosion of boundaries reflects how unresolved psychological conflict can affect moral judgment.

Furthermore, the findings highlight that loss of agency becomes the most tragic outcome of this failed integration. Although Elisabeth is repeatedly reminded that she has the power to stop the process, she is unable to do so. Her dependence on Sue as the “only lovable part” of herself demonstrates that she has surrendered control to the very image she created. In Jungian terms, the ego fails to mediate between persona and shadow, allowing the split within the self to deepen. What begins as an attempt to preserve identity ultimately leads to self-destruction.

Overall, *The Substance* presents a psychological portrayal of how over-identification with the persona and rejection of the shadow can destabilize the self. The film suggests that denying unwanted aspects of identity does not eliminate them, but instead strengthens their influence. Through Elisabeth’s journey, the narrative emphasizes that psychological balance requires acceptance and integration, not separation. The failure to unite these aspects results not in renewal, but in fragmentation and collapse.

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