

Exploring Self-Healing in Trauma Survivors Through the Animated Film *Suzume*: A Jungian Psychoanalytical Perspective

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The European Conference on Arts & Humanities 2025
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Objective: This study applies the framework of Jungian psychology and techniques of fairy tale analysis to examine the animated film *Suzume* as a case for exploring the inner world and healing process of trauma survivors.

Method: Using the “holistic-content” approach of narrative inquiry, this study analyzes the protagonist Suzume’s physical and emotional responses at various stages after experiencing trauma, as well as the self-healing life story she demonstrates throughout the film.

Results: The narrative of this animated film vividly illustrates the Jungian psychological process of self-healing in trauma survivors: (1) Developing a persona to survive in the aftermath of trauma; (2) Encountering dream imagery that carries personal trauma and loss; (3) Understanding the inevitability of trauma through collective unconscious memories; (4) Confronting opposing forces and gradually developing the courage to face trauma; (5) Integrating the powers of light and shadow, achieving self-transcendence, and accepting and recognizing oneself post-trauma.

Conclusion: From the perspective of Jungian psychoanalysis, trauma survivors experience inner and outer imbalances and emotional flashbacks. Through resonating with the shared memory of trauma and integrating both pain and courage, trauma can be given new meaning. This study suggests that animated films grounded in Jungian psychology can guide trauma survivors in self-healing, and provide trauma-informed practitioners with a diverse, cross-disciplinary medium to support survivors in a more dynamic and empathetic way.

Keywords: Jungian psychology, trauma, self-healing of trauma, fairy tale analysis, *Suzume*

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Introduction

Trauma is an emotional response to horrifying events such as accidents, crime, natural disasters, physical or psychological abuse or neglect, exposure to or witnessing violence, bereavement, and war. Survivors often experience initial shock and denial immediately following the event; longer-term responses may include unpredictable emotional states, flashbacks, strained relationships, and even somatic symptoms such as headaches or nausea (American Psychological Association, 2025). Whether triggered by external catastrophes or internal conflict, trauma can profoundly alter an individual's worldview, behavior patterns, and internal state, exerting a long-lasting influence on psychological health and development. Given that most people will encounter at least one traumatic event in their lifetime, those who experience a singular trauma—provided they possess sufficient resources and resilience—can often recover fully. However, overwhelming trauma, insufficient support, or repeated exposures may contribute to the development of psychopathological conditions (Chen, 2024). Understanding how trauma survivors navigate the healing journey, whether through self-initiated strategies or support from others, is a central concern for professionals who assist survivors of trauma.

Jungian psychology offers a distinctive lens into the internal world of the traumatized psyche. Emphasizing the unconscious, the individuation process, and psychic integration, Jungian thought employs mediums such as dreams, fairy tales, and myths as bridges to the soul, offering powerful tools for analyzing both trauma and the healing process—thus facilitating profound trauma recovery. Symbol and metaphor in fairy tales frequently open pathways to new understanding of life and reignite hope for those in psychological impasse (Huang et al., 2021). Many animated films draw upon fairy-tale narratives and historical legends. In these works, creators embed personal backgrounds, emotional expression, and symbolic techniques—not merely telling a story, but also rendering the unconscious conflicts of the psyche (Zeng, 2005). Therefore, this study applies a Jungian theoretical framework to analyze *Suzume's Journey* by Japanese animation director Makoto Shinkai. It examines the protagonist's psychophysiological responses at various post-trauma stages and the unfolding narrative of self-healing. The objective is to offer trauma survivors insights for self-directed recovery and to broaden possibilities for trauma-informed practitioners using comparable symbolic media in clinical support.

A Jungian Perspective on Trauma and Healing Processes

Everyone has the potential to be a survivor of trauma, each bearing unique wounds yet striving to continue. Memories or emotions suppressed by reason can often transform into inexplicable doubts, shame, or distress—and they can subtly influence our daily life (Huang & Lin, 2025). The following delineates the Jungian conceptualization of trauma and healing, serving as a foundational framework for understanding and analyzing traumatic experience.

Complexes and Trauma

In analytical psychology, Carl Jung conceptualizes trauma in terms of complexes, which reside within the unconscious. These complexes are psychological structures composed of clusters of emotional experiences—particularly those repressed by the ego because they are unacceptable—and the most prototypical instance of this is psychic trauma. Jung describes a complex as a fragmented piece of the psyche that splits off under the pressure of trauma or inappropriate tendencies (Jung, 1963, 1997). Such trauma-induced complexes develop when

unbearable fear and revulsion are suppressed. Jung also acknowledged that trauma is not solely personal: human beings can experience collective trauma, which manifests across cultural or familial lines and is encapsulated within group-level complexes (Kalsched, 1996, 2008). Over time, similar feelings are absorbed into the complex, and as its energy accumulates, it increasingly threatens the integrity of the ego (Hayao Kawai, 2020).

Archetypes and Trauma

Jung asserts that trauma is frequently associated with innate archetypes within the psyche. When fundamental archetypes—such as the mother or the hero—are not accurately recognized or sufficiently developed, traumatic experiences can profoundly impair psychological development. In cinematic narratives, characters who endure trauma often embark on a journey to reconstruct these archetypes, thereby facilitating psychological healing.

Collective Unconscious and the Shadow

One of the core concepts in Jungian psychology is the collective unconscious, which refers to a psychological structure that transcends individual experience and exists universally within the human psyche. This structure is composed of various archetypes—universal patterns of the psyche—that manifest in similar forms across different cultures and historical periods. The shadow represents a significant part of the unconscious, embodying traits that are rejected by both society and the conscious self. Contents of the shadow are often associated with negative emotions, impulses, and unresolved traumas, and the integration of these aspects is crucial for personal growth and healing.

Persona

Jung posited that the persona is a social mask or facade individuals adopt to adapt to or cope with the external world; each profession or social role tends to have its characteristic persona. However, there is a risk when a person becomes wholly identified with their persona (Jung, 1963/1997). Trauma survivors often adopt personas as a means to adjust to life after trauma, but if these personas diverge significantly from their authentic inner selves, or if adopting the persona leads to neglecting or suppressing their inner voice, it may result in related psychosomatic symptoms or disorders.

Self, Transcendent Function, and Individuation

The Self is a core concept in Jungian theory that signifies the integration and totality of the psyche, representing the wholeness and unity of the individual. The transcendent function refers to the synthesis of conscious and unconscious contents and serves as a crucial integrative mechanism in the process of individuation. Individuation is a lifelong process of personality development that, within the familial and cultural context in which an individual resides, progresses from an initial germinal state in an arc- and spiral-like movement, ultimately enabling the fullest and most complete expression of the personality's potential (Stein, 2006/2012). The individuation process involves a transition from an incomplete psychological state toward a complete Self, characterized by the gradual integration of unconscious and conscious aspects and the harmonization of internal opposites in a dynamic process.

The Symbolism and Metaphors of the Main Characters in *Suzume's Journey*

Suzume's Journey is a Japanese animated film directed by Makoto Shinkai, released in 2022, set against the backdrop of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. The protagonist, Suzume, is a survivor left behind by the earthquake, bearing the scars of losing her family and harboring inner wounds that remain unhealed and unresolved. She encounters Sōta, a “door closer” tasked with preventing disasters, and together they embark on a journey through memories. In the process of bidding farewell to confusion and loss, Suzume reevaluates her past and present self (Moxingpin Content Center, 2025). The following section introduces the film's main characters and explores their significant symbolism and metaphors.

Character Introductions

1. Suzume Iwato

The protagonist, Suzume, is a 17-year-old high school student residing in the Kyushu region of Japan. Her daily life is profoundly changed by a chance encounter, leading her to embark on a fantastical journey to close the gates of disaster. Throughout this process, Suzume confronts not only external challenges but also her inner traumas and fears.

2. Souta Munakata

A mysterious young man who guards the “gates” and is responsible for sealing the gates of disaster. He fights alongside Suzume, representing external support and guidance, acting as a catalyst for Suzume's path toward healing.

3. Daijin

A mysterious cat who initially triggers the events of the story and simultaneously serves as an important facilitator in Suzume's journey of self-discovery.

4. Tamaki Iwato

Suzume's aunt, who is responsible for raising her.

Symbolism and Metaphors

1. Gates, Closing the Gates, and the Gate Closers

In the film, the “gates” are hidden within ruins and referred to as “back doors.” When these back doors open, “earthworms” emerge—powerful forces living beneath Japan's surface. When enough earthworms burst out from an open gate, they trigger earthquakes. Therefore, the gate closers seek out these open gates to lock them shut and return the land to its original guardian, the *Ubusunagami* (the local tutelary deity). The gates function as protection and separation, blocking external interference and preventing disasters. Closing the gates symbolizes the repression of past wounds, establishing a psychological boundary between the present and the past. Similar to how trauma survivors confront unbearable pain by choosing to ignore or forget traumatic experiences, the act of closing gates in one's psyche represents a self-protective mechanism.

Gate closers hold the mission of guarding the land and its people by preventing disasters. They symbolize caretakers and crisis managers, characterized by passion, perseverance, and decisiveness. Their role demands rationality and high levels of agency to prevent or mitigate the impact of disasters. Although trauma is sometimes unavoidable, preventing traumatic events is as important as trauma treatment—an issue of great concern in mental health fields. In moments of crisis, frontline crisis responders risk their own safety to reduce the impact of disasters. However, by directly facing disaster sites, they are vulnerable to primary or secondary trauma. Similarly, gate closers can be injured when unable to resist the immense forces encountered while closing gates. They too require support and care from others to reduce physical and psychological exhaustion.

2. The Keystone and Daijin the Cat

In Japanese folklore, the keystone (*yōseki*) possesses spiritual power to suppress disasters. It can appear as an ordinary stone or be carved into animal forms; in the film, it manifests as a cat-shaped figure. Daijin the Cat, one of these keystones, can be described as a mischievous deity. As a spiritual entity, when Suzume calls it cute and offers it food, this act is equivalent to a form of worship that empowers the spirit, allowing Daijin to transform from an emaciated appearance into a vibrant and lively cat. Conversely, if it is disliked or abandoned, its spiritual power diminishes, causing it to revert to a weakened state. The director noted in an interview: “The originally calm and beautiful sea can sometimes trigger tsunamis that strike villages. This nature is capricious and uncontrollable by humans. I wanted to express this unpredictability, which I felt resembled the character of a cat.”

Daijin’s unpredictable actions resemble both an antagonist and a guide, and can be interpreted as a concrete embodiment of the “shadow” or an archetype in Jungian psychology. Although residing in the unconscious, the shadow’s power is pervasive and manifests in various ways, urging Suzume to confront her own trauma.

3. The Chair

When Daijin the Cat places a curse on Souta, causing him to transform into a three-legged chair, Suzume takes on the role of gate closer in Souta’s stead and embarks on a journey to restore him to his original form. The director has explained: “When Suzume’s house was swept away by the tsunami, one leg of the chair broke off. The three legs symbolize the scars of the disaster as well as the pain in Suzume’s heart from losing her mother.” The chair was handmade by Suzume’s mother, symbolizing her presence and serving as an attachment figure for the trauma survivor toward lost relationships. Even in its incomplete state, it holds significant symbolic meaning akin to a transitional object. The director further noted: “Although Suzume travels holding the three-legged chair, and despite having only three legs, the chair-form Souta can still stand and run, and Suzume can sit upon it. Suzume herself is the same—despite inner deficits, she continues to live.” The damaged chair also represents the traumatic experience; although trauma leaves profound marks on one’s life, when survivors are able to assign new meaning to their wounds, the richness of life can be renewed and revealed.

Suzume's Individuation Process: Healing of a Trauma Survivor

Suzume is a trauma survivor who experienced the loss of her parent following the earthquake. Her embarking on this adventurous journey symbolizes a process of self-healing.

The Development of a Survival Persona After Trauma

The mother archetype plays a significant role in individual psychological development. Suzume's profound longing for her mother and unresolved pain constitute part of her shadow. Having lost her mother in the earthquake during childhood and raised by her aunt Tamaki, Suzume appears to continue her studies and daily life, yet her interactions with classmates seem guarded, and her relationship with her aunt is tense, marked by defensive behaviors akin to a hedgehog resisting care. Though she adopts an independent and autonomous persona, internally she remains sensitive, lonely, and bereft. Confronted with the sudden loss of a close family member, while others expect her to move on, she struggles to suppress impulses of despair and the desire to disappear.

Dream Imagery Bearing Personal Trauma and Loss

Each dream reveals messages about the dreamer's deep inner psychic structures or complexes rooted in past or present experience; dreams also convey information about the dreamer's relationships with others, as psychic structures and complexes are projected onto these relationships (Whitmont & Perera, 1989/2021). In Suzume's dreams, a vast grassland often appears, with a female figure resembling her mother standing in the distance. This imagery reflects her longing for her mother, the loneliness of emptiness, and the trauma complex. Suzume also retains a chair handmade by her mother, which, despite its incompleteness, remains a crucial relational symbol. Thus, when Souta transforms into a chair, the chair becomes Suzume's inseparable companion on her journey of self-discovery, symbolizing her mother's continuous support.

Understanding the Inevitability of Trauma Through Collective Unconscious Memory

The memory of the 3/11 earthquake is, for many in Japan, like a sealed part of themselves. Much like humanity throughout history facing unavoidable disasters, those who have endured catastrophes carry wounds and scars that cannot be easily erased but must grow with them. Like Suzume, who quietly lives daily life yet carries incomplete memories, the film's disasters and traumas symbolize unresolved suffering within the collective unconscious. These traumas reflect societal and individual anxieties and conflicts. Within these symbolic scenes, Suzume gradually becomes aware of her internal wounds and undertakes healing throughout her journey.

Encountering the Power of Opposites and Cultivating Courage to Face Trauma

Suzume exhibits an unresolved pattern of dependence, demonstrated by her reliance on Souta, reflecting her need for care and emotional support. This dependence is closely linked to post-trauma behavioral patterns and represents aspects of her unintegrated shadow. However, when Souta transforms into a chair, Suzume is compelled to transition from bystander to acting gate closer. In facing disaster and challenges, she demonstrates remarkable courage, accepting the responsibility to save the world and successfully preventing catastrophe. This marks her gradual integration of two inner forces: the god of reason (independence, passion,

perseverance, decisiveness) and the god of emotion (relaxation, dependence, being cared for), transforming into a renewed self.

Throughout this process, despite Daijin the Cat's mischievous, teasing, and unpredictable behavior injecting uncertainty into Suzume's adventure, individuation stories often begin with a cataclysmic event: death, loss, and a sudden plunge into disorientation and chaos (Stein, 2006/2012). Daijin's presence and guidance function as the unconscious leading Suzume to temporarily relinquish conscious control and confront her inner shadow, ultimately reaching her place of original loss.

Integrating the Yin-Yang Opposites, Self-Transcendence, and Reacceptance of the Post-trauma Self

The desire for self-knowledge is a driving force of individuation (Stein, 2006/2012). In the film, although Suzume appears to risk everything to restore Souta's original form, she unconsciously embarks on a journey to reclaim her lost self. This impetus propels her individuation process. As "the one left behind," Suzume encounters her pain anew on this journey. Through integrating the inner yin-yang opposites and achieving self-transcendence, Suzume cultivates a new self—sometimes independent, sometimes dependent; strong yet vulnerable. She gradually reconciles with her aunt and returns with her to their now-ruined family home, where they unearth a diary buried underground.

When memories of the earthquake reemerge, guided by Daijin, Suzume finds the door within her memories. This time, she has the courage to open it and face her childhood wounded self, telling herself: "No matter how sorrowful you feel now, this is a necessary part of growing up, so you need not worry. The future is full of hope. Although the night may seem endless, dawn's light will surely come." This process embodies profound self-acceptance, compassion, and empowerment. When her younger self asks who she is, Suzume honestly replies, "I am you of tomorrow," affirming that only she herself can lead her out of pain.

As Suzume gradually learns to accept her inner shadow and advances along the individuation path, this growth and awakening grant new meaning to her trauma.

Conclusion

This study utilizes *Suzume's Journey* as a case material and employs a Jungian psychoanalytical perspective to analyze the protagonist's psychological and physiological responses across different stages following trauma, as well as her self-healing life narrative. The findings reveal the internal and external imbalances experienced by trauma survivors and the reemergence of traumatic emotions. Through the resonance and invocation of the collective memory shared by trauma survivors, as well as the integration of their inner wounds and courageous strength, new meanings can be ascribed to trauma. This research aims to offer insights into self-healing for trauma survivors and to expand the practical possibilities for trauma practitioners to employ related media materials in supporting survivors throughout their recovery process.

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