

UNITED WISDOM

Jung's shadow: what the concept means and how it is used

The Person and the Inner World

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

I21 · EN

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

Jung's shadow: what the concept means and how it is used

Epigraph

> *“changeable entity”*

C. G. Jung, Collected Papers on Analytical Psychology, preface to the first edition, p. xv; a fragment characterising a person. The Russian version uses our own translation.

What this article is about

A person is certain that they can enjoy other people's success. Yet after a colleague's promotion, they notice a wish to find something dubious about it. The first explanation is convenient: the colleague was simply overrated. The second sounds harsh: I must be an envious person. Between these conclusions, there is room to examine a particular feeling and action without turning either person into a final verdict.

The word “shadow” can help raise such a question or close it with an answer given too quickly. In Jung, it belongs to a historical psychological model; in ordinary speech, it names various unacknowledged aspects of experience. This article distinguishes these uses and suggests ways to approach the concept without self-diagnosis. The narrow historical anchor is drawn from a scientific abstract published by the IAAP, because the Aion chapter in the chosen primary edition was unavailable. An early text by Jung himself was read separately. The everyday scenes below are our own hypothetical examples, rather than cases from his practice or evidence for the entire model's truth.

I. A concept is not an object discovered within oneself

When we call an experience a shadow, it is tempting to imagine that we have discovered a separate internal object. It now explains irritation, mistakes, and relationships. A name alone does not establish a cause, however. It organises attention in a particular way. Understanding what happened still requires circumstances, words, actions, and an opportunity to test our account.

In the hypothetical example of a colleague's promotion, we can begin with a fact: after the announcement, the person disparaged the result in conversation with friends. They can also notice a thought that their own work went unrecognised. These observations allow different questions. Were the promotion criteria clear? How would they like to receive recognition? What

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

do they know about the colleague's work? “Shadow” answers none of these questions in place of investigation.

Distinguishing three levels is therefore useful. The first is observation: I said a particular sentence. The second is an experience I can currently name: I felt disappointed. The third is an explanation: perhaps I was protecting my familiar image of a generous person. This last level remains a hypothesis. Its credibility does not increase merely because it uses psychological language.

Calling a hypothesis a hypothesis does not make it meaningless. It can suggest another observation. A person might notice that they easily support success in a distant field but find it difficult in their own profession. This difference clarifies the subject. Instead of a global accusation, a particular connection appears between comparison, recognition, and behaviour around colleagues.

If every new circumstance is declared another manifestation of the shadow, however, the concept stops helping us distinguish. Agreement confirms the account, disagreement confirms it too, calm becomes a mask, and irritation a confession. Such closure prevents correction. A working idea must leave room for information that would require changing or suspending it.

Recording who made the inference is useful too. Sometimes a person repeats someone else's guess and gradually remembers it as their own discovery. If a hypothesis emerged after a conversation, this should remain part of the account. They can then check which observations preceded the proposed explanation and which followed it. This does not devalue another person's help. It prevents the persuasiveness of their voice from becoming the sole basis of a new story about oneself.

II. A historical framework needs precise attribution

The IAAP abstract of “The shadow” in Aion associates the shadow with dark aspects of personality and primarily the personal unconscious. This is a secondary account of a historical concept, rather than the Jung chapter read here or a current diagnostic criterion.

Distinguishing sources matters to the article's meaning. A concept can be described through a scientific abstract, but we cannot claim to have read the primary argument and all its transitions. A volume title, edition year, and chapter number provide orientation. They do not supply a missing text. Accordingly, this article does not reconstruct the entire system of archetypes or offer a detailed programme of analytical treatment.

A historical psychological model also does not become a fact about an individual reader. Even an exact quotation shows what an author asserted, rather than proving the cause of your behaviour. Separate work lies between the history of a concept and an individual conclusion.

Recognition alone is insufficient: many general descriptions allow us to recognise different states in ourselves.

In everyday conversation, a narrower question is possible: is there a feeling or intention in this episode that I do not want to acknowledge? This question belongs to the reflective practice of this article. It does not assert that every unpleasant response is a Jungian shadow. Nor does it claim that every denial necessarily means repression. A person may discover that the proposed account simply does not fit.

Precision also preserves room to disagree with a historical author. An image can be useful for reading a scene without accepting every associated view. We can be interested in the history of psychology without applying its language to our lives. Declining a concept does not reveal an unwillingness to know oneself. Sometimes ordinary words show the question more clearly and provoke fewer unnecessary conclusions.

Studying an idea's history differs from choosing an exercise. A reader can understand where a term was used and stop there. They need not find a corresponding experience within themselves to prove comprehension. Historical reading has its own value: it shows how a question was posed and which words emerged around it. Personal application needs a separate wish and purpose. These results can be assessed separately, without turning interest in an author into an obligation to work on oneself.

III. An unpleasant feeling does not make the whole person bad

Acknowledging disappointment is often complicated by hearing a moral verdict in it. If I felt envy, all my kind actions must have been false. But one experience and an entire history of behaviour have different scales. An episode can be clarified without cancelling others. Indeed, an excessively broad verdict can distract from particular responsibility.

In our hypothetical example, a person might have sincerely supported a colleague before and simultaneously struggle with the promotion now. These events need not destroy each other. Asking what they did with the new disappointment is more useful. Did they turn it into a circulating rumour? Refuse to help with a shared task? Retain the ability to acknowledge a real achievement even when their own feeling proved uncomfortable?

A feeling does not require immediate enactment. We can notice a wish to sting someone and leave the prepared sentence unsaid. We can acknowledge wanting attention and choose a direct request for conversation. There is room for decision between an internal response and an action. This promises no ease and does not make restraint evidence of final inner harmony.

Acknowledgment should not become a way of avoiding consequences, however. A statement about one's shadow does not correct inaccurate information already circulated. If an action

affected another person, separate work is needed: correct what was said, name a particular mistake, and change the subsequent action. Explaining a motive may help choose this work but does not perform it.

An exact name for the experience may also be unavailable. “Envy,” “resentment,” and “disappointment” sometimes overlap. One need not quickly choose a single word. Describing the observable sequence and retaining several explanations can be enough. This is often less impressive than confessing a hidden essence, but it helps identify the next available step more accurately.

The reverse difficulty also occurs: a person acknowledges an unpleasant feeling too quickly in order to end discussion. They accept “envy” but stop examining how they treat the colleague. Such acknowledgment looks candid yet remains general. Returning to the next observable scene is useful: what will be said at the coming meeting, what information needs correcting, and how will shared work be distributed? These actions give participants grounds for trust. Naming a feeling openly can begin a conversation but cannot replace its continuation.

IV. A strong reaction does not prove projection

One dangerous everyday rule says that everything irritating you in another person belongs to you. It makes their behaviour almost impossible to discuss. If you were interrupted, the problem becomes your hidden domineering side; if deceived, your unacknowledged inclination to deceive. The necessary check is missing between a response and such a conclusion.

In a hypothetical scene, a partner repeatedly misses an agreed deadline. The other participant is angry. They can check whether their reaction is intensified by a habit of demanding perfect performance. This possibility does not cancel the missed deadline, however. Both subjects are needed in conversation: what happened to the agreement and how the person responds. Neither should automatically dissolve into the other.

The reverse mistake is treating one's feeling as an accurate measure of someone else's intention. If I felt humiliated, the speaker must have intended humiliation. Distinction is needed here too. An action might have been careless, deliberate, or understood differently; available evidence varies. Its effect on oneself can be named without confidently reading another person's inner life.

A useful check begins with independent indicators. Which words were said? Did the violation recur? How did the other person respond to clarification? Can the agreement be repaired? These questions establish no universal truth about personality but allow discussion of a particular scene. If new information changes our account, this shows a working distinction rather than insufficient depth.

Self-examination and protecting a boundary can occur together. A person may consider their response and simultaneously decline an unacceptable conversational format. They need not first prove complete freedom from inner contradictions. Requiring such purity would allow every boundary to be postponed indefinitely. Responsibility for one's behaviour grants nobody a permanent licence to violate agreed conditions.

The degree of certainty is useful to check as well. “This is definitely my projection” can close inquiry as quickly as “I am absolutely right.” One can say that personal experience probably intensifies the response while little is known about another person's intention. Both uncertainties remain. Responsibility need not be artificially divided equally, nor must we find an equivalent of every other person's action within ourselves. Sometimes the principal circumstance is a broken agreement, and the personal question concerns only the response to that violation.

V. Acknowledging an aspect of experience does not permit it everything

“Acceptance” is sometimes understood as a duty to agree with every impulse. Yet a wish can be acknowledged without approving the action it urges. For example, someone wants to humiliate a speaker in response to hurt. Refusing to conceal this wish from themselves does not make humiliation a good way to resolve the situation.

In a hypothetical example, Marina discovers that she enjoys being indispensable. When colleagues manage without her, she feels a loss of importance. Acknowledging this may be useful if it helps her stop creating unnecessary dependence. But if she declares her wish to control an authentic side of herself and demands accommodation, the issue has merely acquired a new justification.

A more accurate sequence comprises different actions. I notice a wish. I examine what I hope to obtain through it. I choose a permissible way to approach that aim. Pauses and revisions can occur between them. A need for recognition can become a request for clear feedback instead of keeping every decision in one's hands. One successful label guarantees no such transition.

Not every limit is suppression that should be removed. A limit can protect another person's consent, a shared agreement, or one's own decision. Asking what is restrained and why is useful. Being forbidden to notice a feeling differs from declining a particular action. Confusing them makes responsible restraint easy to declare an enemy of inner freedom.

The outcome can be assessed through an observable change. Is there less indirect pressure? Has a direct request become possible? Has the person stopped requiring others to confirm their indispensability? These questions do not prove integration of an archetype. They show

whether chosen reflection helped in a particular area of communication. If nothing changes, this is a reason to clarify the approach rather than invent another solemn conclusion.

Every acknowledged wish need not be shown to others. A person can consider it privately first and communicate only the necessary part. Marina, for example, can propose a new procedure for handing over tasks. A detailed account of needing to be indispensable is not a condition of that change. If she wants to share it, choosing a recipient and purpose is sensible. Personal candour should not make colleagues responsible for soothing her, confirming her importance, or ceasing to use their new independence. Acknowledgment remains meaningful without compulsory public performance.

VI. Another person's shadow cannot be established on their behalf

The concept easily becomes an instrument of power when applied to a conversation partner. “That is your shadow” may sound like an invitation to reflect while actually closing an objection. The other person no longer discusses the subject; they must prove sufficient self-knowledge. Meanwhile, the author of the explanation stays outside that test.

In a hypothetical scene, a manager calls an employee's disagreement unacknowledged aggression. Perhaps the employee did speak harshly. This still does not establish whether the criticism of the project is correct. Two questions need separate answers. The form of a statement can be challenged while its content is considered. A psychological name does not replace examining facts or remove the right to another conclusion.

Even a well-intentioned person can misunderstand another's story. They notice one response and associate it with a familiar image. The partner knows another circumstance that changes the scene's meaning. If an explanation cannot be corrected, care gradually becomes imposition. Respectful conversation allows the addressee to say that the framework does not fit without another accusation of resistance.

Keeping the practical question in the first person is therefore better. I noticed my response; I want to examine it; this hypothesis is useful to me. Addressing another person can concern a specific action and its consequences. If they propose an internal explanation themselves, it can be clarified as an account. Agreeing to a conversation does not mean indefinite consent to another person's psychological reading.

This distinction matters equally in close relationships. Knowing a biography well supplies context but not the right to define someone finally. New circumstances, changed purposes, and the participant's own description can reorganise the meaning of a familiar scene.

Closeness helps us ask more precise questions when it does not become certainty that every answer is already known.

The subject of shared discussion can be agreed beforehand. For example, someone wants to hear how their sentence sounded, rather than receive an explanation of their entire personality. Their partner should retain this scale. They may say that the sentence was harsh, identify a particular moment, and suggest clarification. Moving toward hidden motives needs separate consent and sufficient grounds. If discussion has exceeded the useful limits, a participant can return it to the question. This is a way to manage conversation rather than evidence that a remark reached a secret painful point.

VII. A story about a hidden side remains a story

A person can construct a convincing story about having long denied a wish. It connects events and supplies a sense of clarity. Coherence does not guarantee completeness, however. Only fitting episodes may have been included, with others left out. Separately checking what the story reveals and what it makes invisible is useful.

Consider a hypothetical example. Alexei says that he avoided competition all his life and has now found hidden ambition. Several precise scenes support the story. Yet he once openly sought a demanding position and calmly lost the competition. This episode does not refute his current wish. It limits the broad phrase “all my life” and shows that behaviour varied under different conditions.

An exception need not immediately become another secret motive. It can simply remain an exception. The story then becomes more suitable for deciding: here competition is difficult for me, here I can manage it, and here I do not want it. This map is less dramatic but does not require every action to fit a single script.

Distinguishing memory from the present evaluation of memory matters too. A past refusal is understood differently today. This may be meaningful reinterpretation, but we cannot confidently declare that the earlier participant already knew the present conclusion. A new story describes the current relationship to the past. It does not always recover the whole internal process that occurred then.

If a story helps choose a specific change, its usefulness can be tested without declaring a final truth about oneself. Alexei can apply for one competition, considering the cost of participation and the option to decline beforehand. Experience will provide new information. He need not prove that the discovered ambition is his most authentic side. Understanding whether the action fits him now is enough.

A story may change after conversation with someone present in the same scene. Their memory is not necessarily more accurate, but adds an independent perspective. Alexei thought he stayed silent from fear; a colleague remembers that the question had already been decided and there was no time for another proposal. Both circumstances are now possible. Comparison need not produce one account of the past. It can show the limits of certainty and help organise a subsequent situation differently, giving Alexei an actual chance to speak.

VIII. Self-knowledge does not require endless suspicion

Encountering the language of hidden sides sometimes produces a habit of doubting every motive. Joy becomes compensation, kindness a mask, and calm a defence. Such searching can continue indefinitely, since another hidden layer can be imagined beneath any answer. Practical reflection needs a limit connected to its purpose.

This limit does not mean refusing complexity. It means choosing a sufficient question for the moment. To correct a harsh sentence, we can understand the circumstances, acknowledge responsibility, and change an action. We need not first construct a complete map of the unconscious. Broader examination makes sense when it helps resolve an additional question rather than merely multiplying suspicions.

In a hypothetical scene, someone asks before every message whether courtesy conceals a desire to be liked. Sometimes the answer will be yes. The existence of that wish does not itself make the message dishonest. Respect, practical convenience, and wanting a good relationship may coexist in it. Checking accuracy and the absence of pressure is more useful than demanding one completely pure motive.

An internal question can also remain open while an external action stays clear. I do not yet know why I reacted so strongly; I know I said something inaccurate and want to correct it. An unknown cause does not remove the possibility of a responsible step. Sometimes subsequent communication supplies material unavailable in solitary reflection.

If a framework only intensifies accusation without distinguishing events, it can be set aside. Changing language does not reveal failure. A person can describe a difficulty in ordinary words, turn to facts, or discuss a particular agreement. A concept should serve understanding rather than demand loyalty regardless of the outcome of using it.

A limit can be stated beforehand: today I will examine one episode and choose one next step. If another significant subject appears, it can be recorded separately. It need not immediately enter the same inquiry, making an entire biography the work of one evening. This procedure promises no removal of difficulty, but makes the work manageable. It allows us to notice when attention to oneself produces clarification and when it merely repeats an old accusation in different words without adding a single observation.

IX. An image's usefulness is tested by returning to life

After reading about the shadow, remaining among beautiful explanations is easy. Important work seems complete because a former response has received a significant name. But reflection's outcome appears in how the person approaches the next scene. Returning to ordinary words, actions, and responsibility toward others is needed.

Return to the hypothetical promotion. The person can acknowledge disappointment, stop circulating unfounded doubts, and separately discuss their own development. They might also discover actual unfairness in the procedure and formulate a factual objection. “Shadow” determines neither option beforehand. Reflection helped if the different subjects became more distinguishable and the next step more honest.

The absence of a quick result remains possible too. Someone understood part of a response but has not decided what to do. What is known can be stated, leaving the rest open. This incompleteness is more accurate than announcing final integration after one exercise. Changeability does not require continually declaring oneself a newly assembled person.

A historical image can remain a conversation partner rather than a judge. It helps ask what does not fit our familiar self-description. Actual circumstances, the right to revise, and the consequences of a chosen action matter next. The concept's usefulness becomes testable here without turning a psychological model into an established fact about every reader.

What this means in practice

Choose one recent episode involving an unpleasant response. Record separately an observable action, the feeling you named, and a possible explanation. If the last line sounds like a final diagnosis, replace it with a testable question. For example, what in this situation touched my need for recognition? Then find at least one circumstance that could change your account.

Consider consequences separately. Does something said need correcting, a promise fulfilling, a boundary stating, or specific feedback requesting? Do not require complete clarity about a motive before an available action. If the action involves another person, their response remains independent evidence that cannot be explained beforehand through your story.

At the end, ask what became more accurate. Perhaps you stopped confusing feeling and action, noticed an exception to a general story, or discovered that “shadow” does not help here. All these outcomes are permissible. The practice is not intended to establish an archetype, diagnose, or promise treatment. Its purpose is a small distinction that makes approaching an actual event easier.

Key quotation

> *“personal unconscious”*

IAAP, abstract 000285 of “The shadow” in Aion; a fragment of a secondary account rather than a direct quotation from Jung. The Russian version uses our own translation.

Connections between traditions

Comparison	Shared question	Significant boundary
Historical analytical psychology ↔ everyday self-examination	What does not fit a familiar self-description?	A working question does not confirm the entire model
Acknowledging a feeling ↔ responsibility	What follows noticing a response?	A wish does not justify every action
A self-story ↔ a particular event	What remained outside the story?	An explanation allows revision

This is a limited comparison of a historical framework and our own practical reasoning; agreement among all psychological schools or religious traditions is not assumed.

Primary sources

• C. G. Jung, Collected Papers on Analytical Psychology, second edition reprinted, London, 1920, edited by Constance E. Long. Title information and a selected passage of the author's preface to the first edition were read, rather than the entire collection. Gutenberg states conditions for the United States; legal status elsewhere is UNKNOWN here.

• IAAP, Collected Works abstracts, Volume 9.2, entry 000285. The relevant abstract was read. This is a secondary scientific orientation; the primary Aion chapter was not read here.

Tags

Jung, shadow, analytical psychology, history of psychology, unconscious, feeling, action, explanation, self-knowledge, responsibility, envy, disappointment, boundaries, projection, hypothesis, observation, personality, self-story, acknowledgment, choice, relationships, context, uncertainty, revision, ethics, image, language, Aion

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a coauthor of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.