

Languages and Literature in the SA Context

Tel: 018 299-1555

Email: Phil.VanSchalkwyk@nwu.ac.za

11 October 2024

Examination report: PhD thesis, Karen Kuhn

This PhD thesis examines the potential for a Jungian alchemical interpretation of Breyten Breytenbach's poetry in the collection *op weg na kû* (2019). The candidate posits that Breytenbach's work engages deeply with social, political, and existential themes, influenced by his Zen Buddhist beliefs, which allows for an alchemical Jungian lens of analysis. Jungian analytical psychology views alchemy as a symbolic bridge between Gnosticism and modern psychology, highlighting the transformative journey toward individuation and the realization of the true "Self". The research aims to both explore this alchemical interpretation and assess the notion that the poems can be viewed in terms of literary alchemy. Through the identification of alchemical processes and symbols in the poems, the thesis argues that the poetic journey reflects an alchemical transformation, integrating alchemical theory with poetic expression.

This is a valuable study that identifies and revisits a valid and significant theme in Breytenbach's work: the alchemical. The contribution lies in the examination of a recent collection of Breytenbach's poetry, referencing primary texts by Jung that outline his depth psychological literary theory. While the study is largely successful, there are shortcomings that will be pointed out throughout the report. These often relate to internal balance within the thesis and the handling and framing of certain components. Although the overarching argument and chapter structure are coherent, there are aspects that could be improved.

Introductory chapter:

The study begins with a brief orientation on alchemy and an introduction to Jung and Breytenbach, with an emphasis on the biographical. Regarding the introduction to Breytenbach, there is a strong reliance on Galloway's scholarly work. Immediately following this, the problem statement is presented, but this is done before any preliminary perspectives on the literature review are provided (existing scholarship is reviewed in later chapters). A general contextualization is lacking. At this stage, the only indication of the research's significance is the suggestion that Breytenbach's work lends itself to an alchemical investigation, accompanied by a hint of what inspired the study. The research gap has not been adequately identified at this point. It is important to note that the Summary of the study cannot substitute for a systematically constructed argument in the introductory chapter. The specific points identified in the seven research questions and corresponding objectives do not emerge from prior contextualization. A broader contextualization and justification for the study are elaborated only in Chapter 2, and the research questions and objectives then only fall into place – retrospectively. In the opening sections of the introductory chapter, the reader should first be oriented in this regard before moving on to the problem statement.

Chapter 2:

This chapter delves deeper into the relationship between Jung and Freud, examining how Jung's successors, particularly Frye, have diverged from his views, while also acknowledging those who remain aligned with his approach. Significant studies on Jung are identified and discussed based Rowland's appraisal (2019).

When the candidate states on page 21, "It rarely refers to the alchemical steps and processes of nigredo, rubedo, and albedo", these concepts have not yet been introduced (apart from the Summary where they are mentioned). There are therefore weaknesses in the construction of the argument. Although the anima and animus are addressed along with some criticism thereof, the candidate does not explore these concepts in depth before moving on to the next matter.

The reception of *op weg na kû* as a Gesamtkunstwerk is discussed, first in a predominantly evaluative vein in the section titled "Introduction". Notably, the evaluative elements of the reception referred to in the introductory section consist solely of praise – negative critique is not incorporated. The discussion tends to move from one statement of a literary to scholar to that of another, in an indicative-descriptive rather than an analytic mode. In the subsequent subsection, "Zen Buddhism", the reception is further explored but now in terms of guiding interpretative statements and arguments from critics about the collection. While this is insightful and touches on a spectrum of highly relevant issues, the argument tends to comprise of expansions on what critics say. On

page 27, it seems as if the author has lost sight of the overarching heading “Reception”, as there is extensive reference here to statements by Jung and Breytenbach. There are too many formulations such as "Hambidge states" and "Hambidge further states". What Hambidge asserts, must suffice here, and this is followed directly by: "Odendaal (2019) points out," and then without further elaboration: "Breytenbach published in 1993..."

Chapter 3:

Chapter three examines Jung's approach to alchemy – this constitutes the theoretical framework for the study. Both Jungian alchemical theory and literary alchemy are proposed as paradigms for interpreting the poems in *kû*. Key sources pertaining to Jung's theory on alchemy are identified and utilized, alongside an overview of prominent Jungian concepts like the collective unconscious and archetypes. The chapter briefly addresses Jung's interest in Gnosticism and his exposure to Eastern alchemy, while also exploring concepts in Western alchemy, particularly Jung's explanation of the individuation process linked to alchemical transformation.

The term "literary alchemy" is defined, with an emphasis on its origins and characteristics. The concept of the collective unconscious, which Jung distinguishes from the personal unconscious, is central to his approach and significantly differentiates it from Freud's. Jung is portrayed as a Gnostic, with this perspective playing a crucial role in his exploration of alchemy, which he sees as a bridge between Gnosticism and modern psychology.

The chapter provides a historical overview of Western alchemy, tracing its evolution from early figures like Herbert Silberer. Jung categorizes the Western alchemical sources into four groups, starting with ancient writers and gradually moving through the history of alchemical thought. He notes that alchemy fell into obscurity during the Enlightenment, as its methods became incompatible with emerging scientific disciplines.

The candidate points out that Jung views individuation as the core process of human development, characterized by the integration of the conscious and unconscious to achieve self-realization. The transformative alchemical stages – nigredo, albedo, and rubedo – are explained in detail, as these will constitute important foci in the poetry analyses. According to Jung alchemy was a concretization, in projected and symbolic form, of the process of individuation. The chapter discusses various alchemical symbols and concepts, including the uroboros, which represents the integration of opposites, and the stages of the alchemical process that involve the transformation of prima materia through cycles of dissolution and recombination.

Finally, the discussion touches on literary alchemy, highlighting Charles Malan's study on Etienne Leroux; this subsection could have been provided with more lucid justification.

Chapter 4:

The methodology is presented relatively late in the thesis, addressing the connection between analytical psychology and poetry as discussed by Jung, which links to close reading. The presentation of Jung's ideas is intriguing but is offered without adequate consideration of the responses to them. Close reading is a suitable methodological approach for this study, but an introductory description of this method in 2024 is not really necessary.

The chapter is unbalanced regarding the representation of New Criticism. It begins with a general discussion before shifting focus to New Criticism in South Africa, specifically in Afrikaans literature. This portrayal is somewhat one-sided, quickly moving to critiques of New Criticism, suggesting it has largely been sidelined in Afrikaans literature. This perspective overlooks the lasting influence of New Criticism in Afrikaans literary scholarship and criticism, though not in a pure or rigid form. Critics like Elize Botha and Cloete, and their followers, have continued to employ it. Finally, Jungian reader-response theory, as discussed by Rowland (2019), is examined.

Chapter 5:

The analysis of Breytenbach's collection begins on page 119 and spans about 50 pages of the total 196 pages of the thesis (including the bibliography). While the distribution of aspects selected for unpacking in the various chapters aligns with the scope of the research questions and objectives, it seems that overly elaborate theoretical and methodological preparations are made for what ultimately feels like a too-brief journey through *kû*.

This chapter discusses poems from *kû* in which alchemical signs, phases, and processes have been identified. The title *op weg na kû*, as the candidate correctly observes, suggests a speaker who is on a journey, in transition, rather than stagnant. The candidate explains that *Circulatio* in alchemy refers to the sequential phases of nigredo, albedo, and rubedo, which continually follow one another. Alchemy, the candidate argues, is not merely a once-off process of discovering gold but a cyclical one, both physical and psychological. The title of the volume implies the possibility of a speaker undergoing transformation.

Against the backdrop of the collection's structure, twenty-one selected poems are analyzed. Close reading is employed to identify alchemical signs and phases, as discussed in Chapter 3's Jungian alchemical theory. Subsequently, the symbolic Jungian interpretation of these alchemical signs and steps is explored as a psychological process within the speaker(s) of the identified poems.

In the methodology chapter, it was stated: "A close reading approach to poems as a whole is used; merely words or lines that may carry alchemical meaning are not considered, as they would then be viewed outside the context of the poem." However, the poem analyses do in fact focus mainly on words and lines with alchemical resonances, beginning immediately, in a consistent manner, with connections to alchemy. For example, it is noted: "The word 'dissolution' relates to the nigredo phase in the alchemical process." I would prefer the poems to be briefly introduced and first discussed as a whole, in context of the collection, before the analytical focus shifts to the specifics of the Jungian alchemical approach.

While the connections between the poems and the alchemical framework are convincing, I find a broader and more evaluative discourse lacking. The analyses are appropriately conducted according to the focus of the study, but these are notably short – the discussion is narrowed down too much around the alchemical. The limited selection of alchemical signs, phases, and processes that are singled out for scrutiny in relation to the poems, creates a repetitiveness in the discussions, and the details of the poems tend to be reduced to the alchemical concepts, dissolving into the general conceptual space of alchemy. The mode of presentation again leans towards the indicative-descriptive rather than critical analysis – the reception of the collection, for example, is by now forgotten.

Conclusion chapter:

The concluding chapter in an integrative manner examines the presence of central alchemical signs, phases, and processes in the selected poems, but here too, the indicative-descriptive approach prevails. The main concepts are sequentially reviewed with reference to previously discussed poems in which they are present. Fortunately, there are welcome summarizing perspectives at the end of the subsections.

The candidate goes on to acknowledge the limitations of the study: she notes that only one collection has been discussed as representative of Breytenbach's oeuvre, and she identifies other Breytenbach collections that could be comparatively subjected to an alchemical reading. Furthermore, she refers to the elaborate, complex nature of the explanations in Jung's relevant works and indicates that we are dealing here with what is termed masculine psychology.

Summative perspective on the study:

It is commendable that the candidate draws from primary works of Jung, as is appropriate for a PhD study, and that the reception of Breytenbach's collection is considered, as this reinforces the significance of the chosen theme and approach.

However, the study tends to be reactive in certain respects, as critics' statements are largely handled uncritically and serve as stepping stones for the argument. The candidate does not develop a strong independent argument and voice. The same applies to the treatment of works by Jung, with much more detail from Jung being unpacked than is actually utilized in the analyses.

The research gap is not sufficiently defined. Even in Chapter 5, when the selected poems are analysed, it is stated that a particular poem “lends” itself to an alchemical reading; the connection is not presented as compelling.

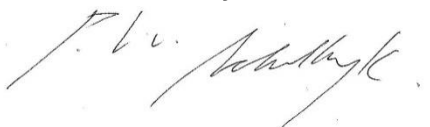
Overall, formulation and use of language are acceptable, though there is inconsistency in this regard. At times, there are cumbersome constructions, such as: "Jung meen soos sy tragiese dood toon, was Silberer se ontdekking van die probleem nie gevolg deur insig daarin te hê nie" (p. 62). Numerous sentences exhibit faulty syntax (incorrect word order; incomplete constructions). Lexically, there are bothersome repetitions, notably the word “noem” which appears strikingly often (136 times!), sometimes in close succession. Similarly, phrases like “aanduidend van” recur frequently. Additionally, "binne" could often be replaced with "in". When a book or person is mentioned, it is frequently preceded by a colon or even semicolon, which to me is an unfamiliar convention. I have indicated examples of language and formulation issues in the manuscript, which I will make available.

There are still traces of Track Changes in the left margin of the manuscript.

To conclude: This thesis makes a meritorious contribution to scholarship by offering a Jungian alchemical interpretation of Breytenbach’s *op weg na kû*. The candidate successfully identifies significant alchemical elements within Breytenbach’s poetry, thereby extending our understanding of his work. The integration of Jungian theory with Breytenbach’s poetic voice opens interpretative possibilities, especially regarding the transformative nature of alchemy and its resonance with existential and psychological themes in the collection.

While there are areas where the thesis could have been further refined – particularly in terms of text editing, the structuring of the argument, critical independence and the balancing of theoretical depth with textual analysis – the study advances a meaningful dialogue between Jung’s analytical psychology and Breytenbach’s work. I therefore recommend that the degree be awarded to Karen Kuhn for the thesis *Jungian Alchemical Transformation in Breyten Breytenbach's Volume of Poetry: On the Way to Kû (2019)*. The candidate can proceed to the final stages towards earning a PhD degree.

Yours sincerely,



Prof P.L. (Phil) van Schalkwyk