

The Irruption of Vulcan *Pon Farr* as Unleashment of Jung's Shadow

We go home. Every seven years of our adult life, Vulcans experience an instinctual, irresistible urge to return to the homeworld and take a mate.

—Vorik, *Star Trek Voyager*, “Blood Fever”

Vulcan philosophy

Vulcans are fictional, humanoid, extraterrestrial aliens, integral members and a founding race of the United Federation of Planets in the *Star Trek* universe. Vulcans evolved on their home planet of Vulcan, which orbits 40 Eridani A, a star that lies sixteen light years away from Earth.

Vulcans epitomize logic and are highly utilitarian and stoical. Stoicism was promulgated by Zeno of Citium (c. 334–c. 262 BC), who taught that emotions should be restrained by self-control and fortitude since clarity of thought is crucial in understanding the universe. The desire for the attainment of pleasure is perceived as a temptation and an incorrect judgment. The four main tenets of Stoicism are simplicity of habits, endurance, self-restraint, and dedication to the community with patriotism and civic responsibility (Stokes 216).

Stoicism is essential to Vulcans, an inherently violent and passionate race who managed to restrain themselves through accepting the tenets of their principal philosopher, Surak. In the Time of Awakening Surak's teachings brought about tolerance, reason, and cultural enlightenment (Dawson, “Awakening”). To Vulcans, Surak is “the greatest of all who ever lived on our planet. . . . The father of all we became” (Daugherty, “The Savage Curtain”). He brought peace to Vulcan, since “Vulcan emotions are extremely intense. We have learned to suppress them. No human would be able to control them” (Landau, “Sarek”).

Moreover, Vulcan emotion can be completely sublimated and purged through the *Kolinahr* ritual (Wise, *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*). This is achieved by completely embracing logic leading to the eradication of passions. Undeniably, logic is a crucial core value that defines what it means to be Vulcan at the most fundamental level: “logic is the cement of our civilization with which we ascend from chaos using reason as our guide” (Grossman, “The Forge”).

Vulcan stoicism leads to asceticism; an almost monastic, disciplined abstention from material pleasures; and to a phlegmatic approach to life, with a comportment that is composed and self-possessed, rarely excited to passionate action or to display emotion. This race is therefore in a state of equanimity, even-tempered and possessed of a deep emotional stability (Barad and Robertson 154–57). Thus, “in accepting the inevitable, one finds peace” (Kretchmer, “Once Upon a Time”).

Vulcan mating: *pon farr*

Both male and female Vulcans experience *pon farr*, “the time of mating” (Pevney, “Amok Time”). This is an extreme physiological reaction that storms through the Vulcan body in an uncontrollable and inexorable manner. *Pon farr* results in a “neurochemical imbalance” (Robinson, “Blood Fever”), “a growing imbalance of body functions, as if in our bodies huge amounts of adrenalin were constantly being pumped into our bloodstreams. . . . if it isn't stopped somehow, the physical and emotional pressures . . . simply kill.” Moreover, once *pon farr* commences, Vulcans are “driven by forces . . . [they] cannot control to return home and take a [spouse]. Or die.” Other “hormonal and endorphin levels are dangerously high” too in this condition (Dawson, “Bounty”), as well as fluctuations in serotonin levels (Robinson, “Blood Fever”). Furthermore, there are also fluctuations in “cortical readings. One returns to normal levels, then another one spikes. It's chaotic. As if the brain's regulatory system had simply shut down” (Robinson, “Blood Fever”).

Vulcan marriage is arranged at a young age; for Spock, for example, this was “seven years of age. Less than a marriage but more than a betrothal. One touches the other in order to feel each other's thoughts. In this way our minds were locked together, so that at the

proper time, we would both be drawn,” resulting in a permanent emphatic bond (“Amok Time”). The bonding occurs after the individual's *kabs-wan*, a Vulcan maturity test in which preteens are left alone to survive for ten days without food, water, or weapons in Vulcan's Forge, a vast and extremely inhospitable desert canyon (Sutherland: “Yesteryear”).

There is a finite window of opportunity for action after the onset of *pon farr*. When Spock goes into *pon farr* during a deep space mission, the ship's doctor remonstrates with the captain: “If you don't get him to Vulcan within a week, eight days at the outside, he'll die” (“Amok Time”).

There are other physical and psychological manifestations to *pon farr*, and these are initially noted by McCoy, the ship's chief medical officer who remarks to the captain:

Well, it's nothing I can pinpoint without an examination, but he's become increasingly restive. If he were not a Vulcan, I'd almost say nervous. And for another thing, he's avoiding food. I checked and he hasn't eaten at all in three days. (“Amok Time”)

Even more startlingly,

when I suggested to Spock that it was time for his routine check-up, your logical, unemotional first officer turned to me and said, “You will cease to pry into my personal matters, Doctor, or I shall certainly break your neck.” (“Amok Time”)

Spock's unusual behavior is highlighted by this unprecedented outburst: “Poking and prying! If I want anything from you, I'll ask for it!” (Pevney, “Amok Time”).

Vulcans consider *pon farr* “extremely personal. . . . do not discuss it.”

There's almost nothing in the medical database beyond a few observations made by Starfleet doctors over the years. . . . For such an intellectually enlightened race, Vulcans have a remarkably Victorian attitude about sex. . . . I fail to see the logic in perpetuating ignorance about a basic biological function (“Blood Fever”).

Clinically and physiologically, when *pon farr* is still “in the early stages, [t]he urges are still controllable” (McNeill, “Body and Soul”). If *pon farr* strikes in the absence of a predetermined mate, the individual may declare *koon-ut so'lik*, a declaration of intent of marriage, thereby acquiring a potential mate (Robinson, “Blood Fever”). The mating urge may be transferred even to non-Vulcans through a telepathic bond (Robinson, “Blood Fever”), and certain micro-organisms have also been shown to prematurely trigger *pon farr* (Dawson, “Bounty”). Options other than mating or death include ritual battle known as *kal-if-fee*, intensive meditation, mating with a holographic simulation of a mate, and experimental medications (McNeill, “Body and Soul”).

Pon farr unshackles emotion and the shadow

Pon farr forces Vulcans away from their default Apollonian mode, coercing a display of the concealed and suppressed Dionysian half of their psyche. *Pon farr* is therefore embarrassing to Vulcans because it results in a complete loss of self-control and the vulgar public exhibition of base emotions. Moreover, Vulcans' telepathic abilities allow them to recognize odiously strong emotions in those around them, such as in individuals who are experiencing *pon farr*. It is for this reason that individuals experiencing *pon farr* seek isolation for the duration of the condition.

A another graphic example is seen when the premature unleashing of *pon farr* in a Vulcan female science officer turns her into an aggressive sexual predator who attempts to seduce fellow officers.

You said we'd need another treatment. . . . Is there any harm in starting now? . . . Rest is not what I need. . . . There's no

reason to be restrained by human morality. . . . You have no idea what you're denying yourself. (Dawson, "Bounty").

Other Vulcan emotional displays

The mortification as the result of overt emotional display is evident not only during *pon farr* but also in other circumstances wherein feelings by Vulcans are publicly expressed. For example, Sarek, Spock's father is a distinguished Federation ambassador. However, he contracts a disease known as "Bendii Syndrome,"

a very rare condition that sometimes affects Vulcans over the age of two hundred. Its early symptoms include sudden bursts of emotion, mostly irrational anger. Eventually, all emotional control is lost. (Landau, "Sarek")

Picard's riposte is that he "can imagine nothing that would be more offensive to a Vulcan. Their emotional detachment is the very core of their being."

Other circumstances may also conspire to lead to the expression of emotions in Vulcans. For example, Spock loses control and falls in love when infected by alien spores (Senensky, "This Side of Paradise") and when he inadvertently goes back in time (Chomsky, "All Our Yesterdays"). Moreover, alien telepathic control may be deliberately used to release emotions in Vulcans, a catharsis that may actually be dangerous, as exclaimed by the ship's doctor: "He's a Vulcan. You can't force emotion out of him. . . . You'll destroy him" (Alexander, "Plato's Stepchildren").

Exceptions to the implicit rule that curbs deliberate emotional display in Vulcans are rare in the canon, and one exception is Sybok, Spock's half-brother who is completely Vulcan. Sybok, even by Vulcan standards, is

exceptionally gifted, . . . possessing . . . great intelligence. It was assumed that one day he would take his place amongst the great scholars of Vulcan. But he was a revolutionary. . . . The knowledge and experience he sought were forbidden by Vulcan belief. . . . He rejected his logical upbringing. He embraced the animal passions of our ancestors. . . . He believed that the key to self-knowledge was emotion, . . . not logic. . . . When he encouraged others to follow him, he was banished from Vulcan, never to return. (Shatner, *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier*).

These instances clearly demonstrate that when emotions are expressed, deliberately or unwillingly, the Vulcan viewpoint is one of restrained distaste at the very least.

Earthly biological parallels: wolf-eels, salmon, polar bears, and elephants

One of the reasons that *pon farr* is fictionally compelling is that, in it, Vulcans exhibit a pastiche of traits from several earthly species in relation to procreation. These include the early (pre mating) and monogamous bonding of the wolf eel, the homing instincts of salmon, the annual and aggressive mating of polar bears, and the blind violence of the rutting bull elephant in musth.

Pon farr manifests features of an estrus cycle. Cycles are moderated by environmental conditions such that mating occurs only when conditions are optimal for reproduction and survival of the eventual offspring. Vulcan is a desert planet (Grossman, "The Forge"), and although details are unavailable, a cycle as above might evolve if the fictional planet Vulcan experienced one wet year in seven Earth year equivalents. The estrus cycle would commence around the termination of the dry period, at the onset of a wet season. This would also explain Vulcan longevity since there would be fewer opportunities to perpetuate the species. Moreover, since Vulcans do not actively seek sex, the mindless urge to mate during *pon farr* may provide the only opportunity for the species' perpetuation.

The wolf-eel (*Anarrhichthys ocellatus*) is a shallow-water species native to the North Pacific Ocean. Individuals form bonds with members of the opposite gender from about four years of age but do not produce eggs until several years later. These pairings are monogamous, and a pair will inhabit the same den for years unless driven off (Lambert *et al*). The similarities to Vulcan processes are

clear, with pre mating bonding and lifelong monogamy.

Salmon (Salmonidae) live along the coasts of the North Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and are anadromous, i.e., they are born in fresh water, migrate to the saltwater ocean to grow to adulthood, and then return to fresh water to reproduce. Salmon return to the precise location of their original spawning in order to breed, and this homing ability has been linked to a very precise olfactory memory (Ueda). Spock naturally compares his race's urge to return to the home planet Vulcan to breed, to salmon's unerring propensity to return to the location of their birth.

The polar bear (*Ursus maritimus*) is largely confined within the Arctic Circle. This species mates once a year in April and May. Males track breeding females through the best seal hunting grounds over distances of up to 100 km, and after finding a suitable female, the male may have to engage in intense fighting with other males for the right to mate, resulting in serious wounds and destroyed teeth. Such fights may continue for an entire week as one male attempts to prevent other males from mating with his female, during which period the female ovulates and becomes impregnated (Rosing). The advantages of breeding just once a year in such monoestrous species is that this allows birth to occur typically in spring so as to allow growth of the offspring during the warm season, increasing the offspring's possibility of surviving the subsequent winter. Vulcans mate less frequently, at a rate of once every seven years, but the parallels of tenacity, a return to a specific locus to mate, and fighting over females to breed are clear.

The blind aggression that Vulcans experience during *pon farr* is best compared with the condition known as musth in bull elephants, which experience periodic episodes of elevated testosterone. This may rise up to sixty times greater than the normal blood level (Jainudeen *et al*). Musth bulls exhibit characteristic behavior, including the secretion of copious amounts of thick fluid from the temporal glands which are located just behind the eyes, ear waving to spread the ensuing musth scent, dribbling of urine, low frequency vocalization, a musth gait with head and ears held high above the shoulders as a visual display to other bulls, and irrational aggression towards everything in their path, including their handlers, who risk death (Poole).

Jung's shadow unleashed by *pon farr*

The Vulcan release of emotion during *pon farr*, as well as in other situations as outlined above, is reminiscent of Jung's shadow, an unconscious psychoanalytic archetype.

Sigmund Freud divided the mind into the conscious mind (ego) and the unconscious mind. The latter he further divided into the id (instincts and drive) and the superego (conscience). In psychoanalysis, the unconscious mind is composed of mental processes that occur without conscious thought. These include automatic skills and reactions, repressed feelings, phobias, and desires, a depot of inactive memories and implicit knowledge, tasks learned so well that they are done automatically. This theory includes the possibility that the unconscious is also a storehouse of the deliberately repressed, particularly that which the individual is actively averse to knowing, potentially comprising a stockroom of the socially unacceptable and of traumatic memories and emotions.

Archetypes are innate universal prototypes for concepts that embrace common groups of memories and interpretations and may be used to interpret observations of behaviors. Jung delineated four main archetypes, including:

1. The Self, the controlling center and the spur of individuation.
2. The Shadow, which contains qualities with which the ego does not consciously identify.
3. The primary anthropomorphic archetype, which is dual: the Anima, the feminine image in a man's psyche, and the Animus, the masculine image in a woman's psyche.
4. The Persona, which is the image that the individual presents to the world.

Since the individual is likelier to repress the least desirable personality traits, the shadow is usually largely negative, instinctive, and irrational.

Individuation is the process whereby undifferentiated components, including personal experiences and elements of the immature psyche, are merged and integrated in order to become the “true self” (Winnicott), a stable and well-functioning individual with a balanced personality. The acknowledgment and integration of the shadow is an essential element in the process of individuation, and the individual “constantly needs the renewal that begins with a descent into his own darkness” (Jung, *Mysterium* 334).

However, this process carries “the danger of falling victim to the shadow . . . the black shadow which everybody carries with him, the inferior and therefore hidden aspect of the personality” (Jung, *Psychology of the Transference* 219). Moreover, the shadow may overwhelm the individual who is paralyzed by indecision or is confused or shocked, and “the conscious becomes the slave of the autonomous shadow” (Stevens, *On Jung* 50). Clearly, “only the fool can permanently neglect the conditions of his own nature” (Jung, *The Undiscovered Self* 86).

Hence, the difficulty is to retain awareness of the shadow while avoiding direct identification with it, a constant risk since the “acknowledgement of the shadow must be a continuous process throughout one’s life” (Hart 92), a precept that Vulcans clearly rebuff.

It has been demonstrated that Vulcan nature and culture require total emotional control; however, *pon farr* results in a periodic and involuntary confrontation with unleashed emotion driven by one the mating urge. Like any human, the typical Vulcan

is, on the whole, less good than he imagines himself or wants to be. Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual’s conscious life, the blacker and denser it is. . . . if it is repressed and isolated from consciousness, it never gets corrected (Jung, “Psychology and Religion” 131).

Pon farr offers an allegory for this repression and expression. The extremely violent eruption of the Vulcan shadow in *pon farr* which only occurs every seven years, and the *koon-ut-kal-if-fee* (mating or ritual challenge and fight to the death) is the catharsis that eventually permits each Vulcan individual to bury his shadow for another seven years, until the next *pon farr* onset. No wonder “[t]hey still go mad at this time. Perhaps it’s the price they pay for having no emotions the rest of the time” (Pevney, “Amok Time”). *Pon farr* thus results in the rejection of the shadow and a refutation of individuation. In rejecting their shadow, Vulcans therefore negate the possibility of a *coincidentia oppositorum* (Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* 186), and the ensuing irruption of the shadow can be extremely intense, as awesome in its violence as in its uncontrollability. Truly, “we shall meet the enemy, and not only may he be ours, he may be us” (Kelly). ▲

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