

Pluto Transits
Alchemy and Initiation
by Dena DeCastro

For astrologers, an upcoming Plutonian time is often the most difficult to present to clients in a way that is both affirming *and* accurate. Not many of us want to say to our clients: “You’re about to be confronted by the reality that nothing is within your control” or “The themes of death and mortality are at the forefront for you right now.” On the other end of the spectrum, we don’t want to leave clients with the impression that their lives are going to be gently kissed by Pluto’s powerful magic and that things will simply be “transformed,” pain-free. I believe that the word “transformation” is much overused, and I chuckled when I found Liz Greene nailing this word as an astrologer’s euphemism:

Transformation is a resonant word, redolent of numinosity and deep psychic purpose, and most encouraging to the client who has an approaching transit or progression involving Pluto. But it is, unfortunately, the sort of word which we like to call upon when the meaning of a planet is vague or merely intellectual, or when the experience foreshadowed in the horoscope augurs crisis and suffering for the client.¹

Of course, I’m also guilty of using this euphemism. Many great modern astrologers have given me better language to approach the task of delivering the news of a Pluto transit. But for all their grace and intelligence, I am still left face to face with clients about to have Pluto square their Sun or oppose their Moon, and I am daunted. In my personal experience, and from what I have observed, crisis and suffering often inevitably accompany a Pluto transit. In this article, I will show how the ancient languages of alchemy and astrology can work hand in hand to aid the client approaching a Plutonian passage. The metaphors and concepts of the alchemical process can help astrologers to recontextualize the Pluto transit as an opportunity to mine the symbolic “gold” of spiritual alchemy, which is, ultimately, the process of becoming a self-actualized human being.

When transiting Pluto squared my natal Pluto in my mid-thirties, I was living in a kind of “Plutonian stew,” with Pluto’s symbols bubbling up all around me. The “P-Square,” as I’ve come to fondly call this transit, initiated one of the most painful periods of my life. As Pluto transited my 7th house of marriage and partnership, my primary and closest relationships were taken from me. I suppose it could have been worse, but for a woman with a 2nd-house Sun in Cancer and a Taurus Moon, the death of my

mother, followed by a divorce, then the loss of my house, were the culmination of my worst fears. My nightmare was complete when I moved from my comfy home to a dark, one-room studio apartment and found that I had some unexpected roommates: a family of rats. I spent much time alone there in those first months after the divorce (following a call to pest control). The apartment's resemblance to a tomb did not escape me. I was an astrologer at the time, perfectly aware that I was in the middle of my own Pluto square. I'd watched it coming down the tracks for a couple of years beforehand. Did that knowledge help me? I think it did. One thing that definitely helped was to know that, like all transits, it would be of limited duration — “this, too, shall pass” — with the promise of a new life on the other side. But even with astrology as an ally, I was searching for a way to make sense of the intense suffering at hand.

During this time, I found unexpected help in my dark inner journey while taking a graduate course on the work of C. G. Jung, where I discovered the connections between astrology, depth psychology, and alchemy. I was surprised to learn that Jung had become fascinated with alchemy² when he found a specific image from a patient's dream in a book of alchemical symbols. This experience led him to derive, through empirical evidence from clients' dreams, that there was a connection between the dream world and alchemy. It was then that he realized the wealth of alchemical symbolism available for study. According to Marie-Louise von Franz, the Jungian psychologist who translated many of his works: “This insight led him to regard the *opus alchymicum* [alchemical work] as a mental process of transformation aiming at a goal identical with the ego's total integration of its unconscious background.”³ Hence, Jung came to link the principles of alchemy to his theory of Individuation⁴ and viewed it as a metaphor for psychological and spiritual integration. He recognized that the process of alchemy used symbols for the purpose of transformation in much the same way as the psyche uses dream symbols to integrate unconscious contents into the conscious mind, allowing us to more deeply know ourselves.⁵

It was, at first, a leap for me to even make the connection between psychology and alchemy. Indeed, many of Jung's colleagues and disciples did not understand his interest in alchemy, perhaps because it is neither accessible nor easily understood. Alchemical teachings were intended to be obscure, as is the case in any occult art — the original meaning of the word *occult* is “hidden.” One of the simplest definitions of alchemy is from Paracelsus, the famous Renaissance alchemist, astrologer, and Hermetic philosopher: “Alchemy means to carry to its end something that has not yet been completed.”⁶ The ultimate goal of early alchemists was to transmute lead into gold, thereby transforming an imperfect metal into a perfect one. This work of carrying something “to its end,” toward its most perfect form, was also known as “The Great Work,” or “Opus,” and the end result was the “gold,” literally or symbolically. So, on the surface, ancient alchemical practice was a physical science that involved working with metals, chemicals, and the elements, but as Jung asserted, these teachings were

about more than chemistry experiments. Hidden behind appearances were esoteric teachings intended to lead one through a process of human trials and tribulations toward the ultimate achievement of what was called *unio mystica*, or mystical union with God.⁷ In Jung's mind, the end result of "The Great Work" was the rebirth of the *self* as the individuated *Self*. The *Self* is what Jung considered to be the totality of the psyche, encompassing not only the ego but also the psychic center, the source of dream images and all that moves us forward on a path of psychological growth and maturation.

The Integration of Astrology and Alchemy

Alchemy, like astrology, links the natural world to principles of spiritual enlightenment, and both have followed parallel paths over the centuries. Just as astrology originated with the observation of the physical movement of the planets, alchemy began as the physical study of combinations of elements and chemical compounds. But as both sciences evolved, they became potent carriers of symbolic meaning that could point the way toward awareness of one's own unconscious material, an awareness that is necessary for deep psychological transformation. As an astrologer learning of these concepts during a search for deeper meaning in my own suffering, I began to ponder how modern astrologers might incorporate the language of alchemy into their work with clients. It seemed that these two sciences of the psyche could provide a powerful combination, offering a new way of viewing the most difficult of astrological seasons.

The idea of integrating the principles of alchemy into astrological practice is not new. As Liz Greene states in her fascinating lecture, "Alchemical Symbolism in the Horoscope": "The perspective of alchemy turns the horoscope into a map of a process rather than a listing of static character traits."⁸ Greene's thesis in this lecture is that the knowledge of the stages of the alchemical process can provide astrologers with another set of tools to guide clients who are interested in using the birth chart as a way to move forward in their own Great Work. Greene goes on to apply the use of alchemical symbols and processes to deciphering the natal chart, and links each of the stages of the alchemical work to planetary transits and progressions.⁹ My intention here, however, is to focus upon just one of the alchemical phases, the *nigredo*, and its similarities to that most potent of astrological events, the Pluto transit. It is the phase with which I have intimate personal experience, and the one I can speak to directly from my work with clients.

The Nigredo and the Alchemical Process

During my "P-Square," Jung's writings on alchemy blended into my "Plutonian stew." His descriptions of the first stage of alchemy, the *nigredo*, or "the blackening," seemed to mirror the turbulent passage I was navigating. Jung wrote: "Confrontation with the shadow produces at first a dead balance, a standstill that hampers moral

decisions and makes convictions ineffective or even impossible. Everything becomes doubtful, which is why the alchemists call this stage *nigredo*, chaos, melancholia ..."¹⁰ I suddenly glimpsed the possibility that this "black" time could be part of a larger psychological process, a necessary first step of my initiation into the Great Work. But the first step in the process of moving toward the light is an immersion into darkness. As Jung believed, we cannot reach Individuation without first confronting the shadow.

In order to have a context for the *nigredo* phase, let's take a look at the four stages of the alchemical process, each characterized by a color and a set of actions.

Table: The Alchemical Process

<i>Nigredo</i>	Blackening	putrefaction, corruption, dissolution
<i>Albedo</i>	Whitening	purification, burnout of impurity
<i>Citrinitas</i>	Yellowing	spiritualization, enlightenment
<i>Rubedo</i>	Reddening	unification of human with god

Keep in mind that there are many versions of the stages of alchemy, according to different authors and sources — some with seven stages, some with twelve — but these four stages are what Jung references within his system. As he writes in *Psychology and Alchemy*: "Although hardly two authors are of the same opinion regarding the exact course of the process and the sequence of its stages, the majority are agreed on the principal points at issue ... Four stages are distinguished, characterized by the original colors ... [black, white, yellow, and red]."¹¹ Regardless of these variations in structure, there is general agreement in the alchemical texts about its primary goal: to transmute dense, imperfect matter, also known as the *prima materia*, toward less and less density, eventually toward perfection. The *prima materia* is the raw material being transformed. Rosemary Ellen Guiley writes in *The Encyclopedia of Magic and Alchemy*: "The *prima materia* is the beginning and end of all things. It holds the seed of perfection."¹² Like most concepts in alchemy, however, the *prima materia* cannot be reduced to one thing or one definition. In terms of spiritual alchemy, it is most helpful to think of the *prima materia* as the individual who is undergoing the Great Work.

There is also general agreement among alchemical texts that the first stage of the process is the *nigredo*, or the "blackening,"¹³ a time when the ego's delusion of mastery and control is severely challenged. The alchemical process begins when the *prima materia*, that which is to be the subject of the work, enters the *nigredo*. On the physical level, the *prima materia* begins to decay and die, undergoing *putrefaction*. The alchemists believed that, in order to transform matter, it must first be reduced to its pre-formed state, also known as *chaos*. In psychological terms, the individual is stripped of ego-

identity, causing disorientation and confusion. The Great Work begins as we are pushed toward investigation of the darkness within ourselves.

During my Pluto square, disorientation, confusion, and the sense of “ego-death” abounded. I faced the loss of things that had previously defined me: my marriage, my home, my relationship with my mother. I certainly saw chaos as the most prominent force in play at the time. Paradoxically, I gained clarity about who I *was* in the light of who I *wasn't* anymore when stripped of these externals. I was, as one close friend put it, “like a baby phoenix egg still sitting in the ashes, waiting to be born.” The phoenix, as it turns out, is an alchemical symbol for the culmination of the Great Work.¹⁴ Alchemy and its symbols helped me to get a foothold in the midst of chaos and, along with astrology, provided psychological awareness of which stage of the the process I was in.

Pluto Transits and the *Nigredo*

Throughout astrological writings describing Pluto transits, the notion of the death of the ego in the face of chaos is prevalent.¹⁵ As astrologer Robert Hand writes: “The nature of Pluto is similar to that of the Hindu god Shiva, the creator and destroyer. Pluto usually begins by breaking down a structure; then it creates a new one in its place.”¹⁶ It may be the structure of our lives on the physical level and/or the structure of our ego on the psychological level. Of natal Pluto, Liz Greene describes its effect of anchoring us to the unconscious material and making it a necessity to continue to work within this uncomfortable territory:

A quality of chronic, repetitious suffering or restriction, which circles back again and again just when one thinks oneself free of it, is something I associate with Pluto's effect on the spheres of life represented by the astrological houses. There is never any final solution, but rather, a spiraling which takes the individual deeper and deeper into himself.¹⁷

We are forced to go deeper down when Plutonian events mark our lives. We lose a loved one, a marriage ends, we meet financial crisis. Or the events may be less externally visible: We experience an unexplained depression, unpleasant childhood memories resurface, or we suffer symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder from a previous trauma years after the event. In either case, these external and psychic intrusions force us to look at the roots of our pain, at what lies beneath the surface. We feel enough pain that it makes us work to get to something, anything, that might alleviate it. We may also find that, when stripped of those things we thought we could not live without, we can actually survive.

How can using alchemical language help us to reframe this potentially traumatic time for the client? The concept that the *nigredo* is an initiation into the Great Work is a helpful place to start. At the beginning of a journey, before we find our footing, we

often feel the most unsure. We must leave behind certain aspects of our lives and ourselves in order to move forward. The *nigredo* phase is the dying off of an old state of being and the rebirth of the new. Likewise, the endings and new beginnings during a Pluto transit signal that we are exiting one phase of our lives and entering another. When we are given a context, a vision of ourselves within a story, then the suffering, doubt, and uncertainty may be easier to bear. Von Franz writes, "In alchemical literature it is generally said that the great effort and trouble continues from the *nigredo* to the *albedo*; that is said to be the hard part, and afterwards everything becomes easier."¹⁸ The idea of the *nigredo* as the first and most difficult stage of a journey that becomes easier and more rewarding may be helpful when applied to a Pluto transit; perhaps the transit itself is a kind of initiation, and initiations are often marked by the themes of sacrifice, surrender, and discomfort or pain. Once the initiation has taken place, there is no returning to the pre-initiated state. We become something new, like the phoenix rising from the ashes.

Chart Example: Pluto the Initiator

Pluto transits can mark a time when, through loss and crises, our true power comes forth. A client of mine graciously offered to let me share her chart and her experiences with a long string of Pluto transits. "Sandy" has a large stellium in Sagittarius that includes a conjunction of the Sun and Moon, followed closely by Neptune, Mercury, and Mars. As Pluto transited this stellium, peak astrological events included conjunctions with her Sun, Moon, and Midheaven. These transits occurred over a ten-year period, from roughly 1998 to 2007. I asked her about those years and what the prominent themes were for her. (See natal chart on following page).

The event that had most “rocked her world,” as she put it, was the sudden death of her relatively young father from a heart attack in 2004. Although they had not been close over the years, her father’s death shook her greatly because they had become closer recently. During that time, she was at odds with her mother, from whom she had been estranged for some years. The sudden and unexpected nature of the event added to the difficulty, and she found herself contemplating mortality — her own and that of those around her. Simultaneously, Sandy was in an “intense, deeply connected, but chaotic” relationship with an older man that began to disintegrate toward the end of these transits. There was very little emotional security available to her during that time; she was always on tenterhooks with her lover, one of her parents was suddenly gone, and she had a difficult relationship with the other.

These themes obviously correspond to Pluto transits of the Sun and Moon — the Sun can symbolize an important male figure in our lives and the Moon our connection to our home, family, sources of emotional comfort, and our literal mother. Sandy experienced actual death, loss, and upheaval in all of these areas. But because she was shaken at such a fundamental level, she was pushed further out of her previous comfort zone and into new territory. When Pluto conjoined her Midheaven, she experienced being “called” to explore abilities that she had been aware of but had largely ignored: her talent as a medium who could see and hear the deceased. She had previously been afraid of this talent. But her father’s death catalyzed a noticeable heightening of her sensitivity toward the Otherworld, and she began to see and hear deceased spirits more frequently. At the Midheaven transit, she began to do readings for others, using her ability in a public way for the first time, as she shared this very Plutonian skill.

Also relevant to the theme of mediumship is her natal Moon–Neptune conjunction in mid Sagittarius. This conjunction often denotes psychic sensitivity and the presence of innate psychic gifts. Pluto had just completed a conjunction with the Moon and Neptune in late 2002–03, and the transit was ongoing throughout the time of her father’s death in 2004. As Pluto passed over her Midheaven, Sandy felt impelled to use her abilities, to share the knowledge she’d gained from going into the depths during the Pluto transit.

Pluto’s transit over Sandy’s Sagittarius planets and Midheaven appeared to be an initiation. Loss, deep grief, and chaotic circumstances had drawn her into Pluto’s realm. Her life was transformed, and she felt called to step forward with authenticity and purpose to a new life and identity as a medium and intuitive reader. When I explained that the *nigredo* was the first stage of the alchemical Great Work, and that the time she had just walked through was her initiation period to open the door to her true work, she found this idea incredibly helpful, even in retrospect. Although she still struggles with the idea of fully embodying the public identity of a medium, and works another more traditional job during the day, the alchemical perspective provided her with a sense of purpose about her gifts and all that she had gone through to access them.

Pluto's Gifts

What does Pluto want of us? we might ask. What sacrifice will be enough? Often, clients will speak of feeling "punished" by Pluto. I don't discount this feeling and could absolutely relate to it during my own transit, but perhaps it isn't useful to see it that way. Pluto's force is not one of punishment; it is not here to bring retribution for some past "mistake." In fact, there is no rhyme or reason to Plutonian events. The cold eye of Pluto sees our lives from the outer reaches of the solar system, from a perspective that we can't relate to or comprehend. Pluto's cycle around the Sun takes about 248 years, roughly three human lifetimes, and its scope is vast — far outside the scope of what makes sense in the course of one life. Tragedies happen. Young, vibrant people, who want to live, die of cancer too soon. Masses of people are killed when buildings are hit by airplanes. Earthquakes kill millions and devastate entire countries. There is no answering the question "Why?" But the very inability to answer that question forces us to confront not only the shadow within ourselves, but the shadow element of life itself.

We would not do this unless we were forced by outer circumstances. It is human nature to seek comfort, stability, and control. When our lives are going along swimmingly, we do not choose to undergo the process of spiritual alchemy voluntarily. So, life dishes up out-of-control circumstances that activate our fears and push us out of our comfort zones, and the timing can often be linked to a Pluto transit in the chart. As Greene writes of Pluto: "It is ironic, and paradoxical, that the genuine acceptance of the unchangeable is often one of the keys for true and deep change within the psyche. But this little piece of irony does not appear to be learnable in any school but life's fires."¹⁹ Perhaps this is Pluto's purpose when it presents us with the unchangeable: to drive us deeper down, so that we will eliminate our fears by confronting them, and realize, paradoxically, how powerful we are.

Just as happiness is not a predominant theme of a Pluto transit, neither is it the theme of the *nigredo* stage of alchemy. Achieving happiness does not seem to be the point of doing the Plutonian work, nor following the path of the alchemical Great Work. The process of spiritual alchemy is ultimately about realizing our potential and living a life in which we are moving from less density toward light — from lead to gold. The nature of a Pluto transit certainly has the ability to make us "less dense," in all meanings of that phrase. We shed many of the dead or dying things in our lives so that our load becomes "lightened." We have realizations about life and ourselves that finally penetrate the "density" of our minds. But is this movement away from density about happiness? Happiness may sometimes be a side effect, but to put it as a foremost goal or expectation leads us to another place altogether. Brad Kochunas addressed the need to embrace Saturnian and Plutonian energies (within a culture that is almost pathologically Jupiterian) in his article, "In Praise of Melancholy or the *Danse Macabre*":

When we try to escape suffering, failure, defects, and disappointments, we are only half alive ... If we can fully embrace the rhythms of Saturn and Pluto and immerse ourselves in their *Danse Macabre*, knowing full well and gracefully accepting that we are not the lead partner, then we are truly dancing with the stars.²⁰

Happiness has its season, but so do depression and grief. And often these emotions are the precursors to the fulfillment and joy we desire.

During my Pluto square, the question arose as to whether or not I had a choice in entering into this "Great Work." Do any of us? Everything changes. It is a law of nature that matter is created, evolves, grows old, and dies. Its dead form is the fertilization for the rebirth of the new. The spiritualizing processes of both alchemy and planetary transits are rooted in natural law. The only choice we may have is whether or not to participate consciously or unconsciously, but it appears to me that we will experience the *nigredo*, or a Pluto transit, whether we decide to or not. What has been helpful to me in knowing my own transits is the perspective and overview they offer. It is apparent that there is an order and a season to all I experience, pleasant and unpleasant, easy and difficult, and that sense of a larger order gives me solid ground to stand on, even during times of chaos. This order can be glimpsed through both astrology and alchemy — wisdom traditions that, when joined, can ultimately provide a deeper understanding of the inevitable difficulties life brings.

Chart Data and Source

"Sandy," November 30, 1978; 1:14 p.m. PST; Portland, OR, USA (45°N31^, 122°W41^); AA: birth certificate.

References and Notes

1. Liz Greene, *The Astrology of Fate*, Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1984, p. 50.
2. This fascination resulted in three volumes entitled *Collected Works: Psychology and Alchemy, Vol. 12* (1953), *Alchemical Studies, Vol. 13* (1963), and *Mysterium Coniunctionis, Vol. 14* (1967), Princeton University Press.
3. Marie-Louise von Franz, *Alchemy: An Introduction to the Symbolism and the Psychology*, Inner City Books, 1980, p. 14.
4. Jung gave name to the "individuation process." In *Man and His Symbols* (Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1964, p. 161), von Franz defines this process, using the example of the role of dream symbols, as "... a sort of hidden regulating or directing tendency at work, creating a slow, imperceptible process of psychic growth — the process of individuation."

5. C. G. Jung, *Dreams*, trans. R.F.C. Hull, Princeton University Press, 1974, p. 73: "Because dreams are the most common and most normal expression of the unconscious psyche, they provide the bulk of the material for its investigation."
6. Jolande Jacobi, *Paracelsus*, Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 141.
7. Brian Cotnoir, *The Weiser Concise Guide to Alchemy*, Red Wheel/Weiser, LLC, 2006, p. 51.
8. Liz Greene and Howard Sasportas, *Dynamics of the Unconscious: Seminars in Psychological Astrology, Vol. 2*, Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1988, p. 262.
9. I recommend Greene's lecture, from the above-referenced book, for further reading and a deeper understanding of alchemy and its symbols as they relate to the natal chart.
10. Joan Chodorow, ed., *Jung on Active Imagination*, Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 168.
11. C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy: The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Vol. 12*, Princeton University Press, 1968, p. 230: "The *nigredo* or blackness is the initial state, either present from the beginning as a quality of the *prima materia*, the chaos or *massa confusa*, or else produced by the separation (*solutio, separation, division, putrefactio*) of the elements."
12. Rosemary Ellen Guiley, *Encyclopedia of Magic and Alchemy*, Visionary Living, 2006, p. 261.
13. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, pp. 228–229.
14. Guiley, *Encyclopedia of Magic and Alchemy*, p. 253.
15. Refer to the writings of Steven Forrest (*The Book of Pluto*), Jeffrey Wolf Green (*Pluto: The Evolutionary Journey of the Soul*), and Liz Greene (*The Astrology of Fate*) regarding Pluto transits.
16. Robert Hand, *Planets in Transit: Life Cycles for Living*, Whitford Press, 1976, p. 477.
17. Greene, *The Astrology of Fate*, p. 50.
18. Von Franz, *Alchemy*, p. 220.
19. Greene, *The Astrology of Fate*, p. 50.
20. Brad Kochunas, "In Praise of Melancholy or the *Danse Macabre*," in *The Mountain Astrologer*, Feb./March 2009, p. 84.

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CHART:

"Sandy"

Placidus houses, Mean Node

Source: Client BC/BR