

**SYSTEMIC CONCEPTS IN LITERATURE AND ART**

by

**Scott Johnson**

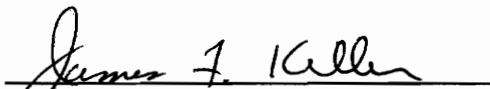
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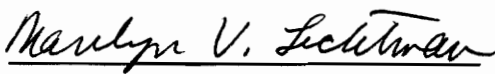
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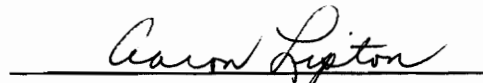
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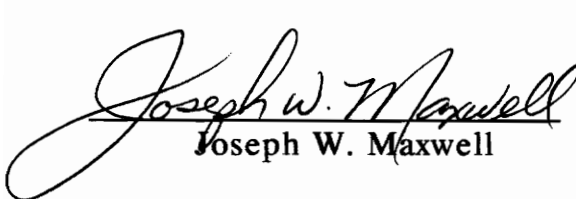
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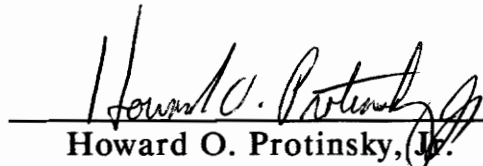
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# SYSTEMIC CONCEPTS IN LITERATURE AND ART

by

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(ABSTRACT)

The examination of literature and art has been one of psychotherapy's most powerful ways of explicating its theories and disseminating its concepts. In this study, I have explored various concepts of family psychotherapy by applying them to three works of imaginative literature, and one work of sculpture: Luigi Pirandello's play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Franz Kafka's novella, *The Metamorphosis*, Robinson Jeffers' poem, "The Purse-Seine," and the ancient Roman sculpture, the *Laocoon*.

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Doug Sprenkle, editor of *The Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, and two of his anonymous reviewers. Carlos Sluzki, editor of *Family Process*, and two reviewers there, were similarly helpful in my analysis of *Six Characters*, a version of which appeared in that journal last fall. I thank also Tech's Graduate School, which provided the funds for my trip to Rome to study the *Laocoon*.

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There are others who are part of this study in less clear ways whom I nonetheless would like to name: Sally Longstreth, my high school writing teacher, who always encouraged my thinking and writing and demanded I give my best to it; Ed Groff, Lou Putnam, and Ben Schwartz, my college professors, who did the same. This work is dedicated to them.

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## SYSTEMIC CONCEPTS IN LITERATURE AND ART

One of the most common methods for exploring the theories of psychotherapy has been to apply them to art and literature. Freud's (1958a) *Creativity and the Unconscious*, or Jung's (1964) *Man and His Symbols*, and more recent works like Bettelheim's (1977) *The Uses of Enchantment*, or Skinner's (1976) *Walden II*, are only a few examples of this trend. As Ernest Kris (1952) observed, and as Simon Lesser (1957) stated after him,

Freud and his followers ... turned to literature first of all for the clarification and confirmation of their hypotheses. Time and again Freud paid tribute to poets and storytellers for their intuitive understanding of the psychological mechanisms he was laboriously struggling to formulate. (Lesser, 1957, p. 17)

Literature and art were, for the pioneers of psychotherapy, "supplementary evidence" (Kris, 1952, p. 17) for the validity of psychotherapeutic thought.

For the general public, the persuasive power of this evidence often has been greater than the most carefully conducted traditional research. The light that Freud's concept of id, ego, and superego



"throws upon the whole history of art ... is so revealing that ...," for many people, like the critic, Herbert Read (1937), "it constitutes the strongest evidence for the general validity of the theory of psychoanalysis" (pp. 200-201).

Strangely, however, the ideas of family psychotherapy have only occasionally been used to examine literary or artistic artifacts. My reviews of journals like *Family Process*, *The Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, *Contemporary Family Therapy*, *The Family*, or *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, and my searches of books and indexes, reveal only a handful of attempts to explore the application of family therapy to works of literature or art, despite Framo's (1982) statement over a decade ago that "a lot can be learned about family dynamics from plays, movies, and novels" (p. 277).

Frank Pittman, of course, has reviewed movies from a therapist's standpoint for *The Family Therapy Networker*, and I am told by an anonymous reviewer for *The Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* that the Western Round Table on Modern Art, held in San Francisco in 1949, included systemic analyses (though how well we would recognize them as "systemic" now, coming as they did nine years before Ackerman's [1958] *The Psychodynamics of Family Life* appeared, one of the earliest works of family therapy, is open to

question).

Nonetheless, to my knowledge, only six writers in the published scholarly literature of the past two decades, other than myself, have tried to apply concepts from family therapy to works of imaginative literature. And no writer, with the possible exception of Schneider (1985), has used family therapy as a means to investigate works of plastic or graphic art.

Lipton (1984), and Bateman (1985) both employed systemic concepts to interpret Arthur Miller's play, *Death of a Salesman*. Vande Kemp (1987) examined such Batesonian ideas as disqualification and mysticism in the novels of Charles Williams, while Lidz (1975) took a family oriented, if not altogether systemic, approach to William Shakespeare's, *Hamlet*. Sander (1979) tried both to explicate a family systems point of view, and to integrate it with a psychoanalytic perspective, through discussions of *Hamlet*, T.S. Eliot's plays, *The Cocktail Party*, and *The Family Reunion*, and Edward Albee's drama, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Zuk (1990) used two short stories of Edgar Allen Poe to better formulate a systems understanding of delusions of persecution, and Schneider (1985), though ultimately more psychoanalytic than family focused, has studied symbiosis and differentiation in the sculpture of Henry Moore.

Given the rich mixture of psychology, psychiatry, and other areas in which the study of literature and art has been central, and from which family therapy springs, why so few investigators have applied systemic thinking to literature and art is not immediately clear. Yet a partial explanation may be family therapy's general concentration on purely clinical research, rather than the broader applications of systems thinking.

Gurman (1983), Jacobson (1985), Shields (1986), and others (Piercy & Sprenkle, 1986; Pike & Piercy, 1990), all have argued for an emphasis on clinical studies as the primary means to establish the legitimacy of the discipline. Gurman (1983) in particular has stressed how "family therapy consumers" – mental health professionals, public officials, and families in need of assistance – all want to know "what works" in family therapy, and he has stated that the best way to show this is through empirical studies of clinical efficacy.

Their perspectives, of course, have been challenged by therapists with a less traditional bent. Keeney and Sprenkle (1983), Tomm (1986), Morris (1987), and Lichtman (1988), have noted the apparent inconsistency between systemic ideas such as circular causality and researcher subjectivity, and the linear cause and effect assumptions underlying traditional research. Yet even writers who question the use

of mainstream research techniques to examine systemic family therapy models, and argue, like Keeney and Morris (1985), or Auwerswald (1987), for new forms of inquiry, still confine the bulk of their attention to the investigation of clinical outcomes and processes.

Clinical interactions, however, can frequently be observed in non-clinical settings. "Often," writes Sander (1979), "it is the artist who intuits and reflects these [systems thinking's] creative revolutionary conceptions of ourselves" (p. xvi) before they are discovered by the clinical investigator. Thus, to increase public understanding of family therapy, and to deepen our own knowledge of our field, its further application to literary and artistic works is an important, and perhaps essential, development.

#### A SYSTEMS VIEW OF FOUR WORKS OF DRAMA, FICTION, POETRY, AND SCULPTURE

The study that follows tries to expand on earlier systems explorations of cultural artifacts by examining, in separate chapters, three works of imaginative literature: Luigi Pirandello's (1952) play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Franz Kafka's (1968) novella, *The Metamorphosis*, Robinson Jeffers' (1988) poem, "The Purse-Seine," and one work of art: the early Roman sculpture, the

*Laocoon.*

Though basically an extension of previous efforts to see art and literature from a family therapy perspective, it differs from them in important ways. The use of a constructivist (Maturana, 1988) viewpoint to examine a work of literature, as I've employed in my analysis of *Six Characters in Search of An Author*, or a specifically systemic analysis of a work of sculpture, or of poetry, are unique among the published studies that I know. Similarly, while Sander (1979) has examined several plays in his book, *Individual and Family Therapy*, no investigation I've discovered looks at works from different literary genres, and from art and literature, in one volume.

*Choice of Works and Systemic Concepts*

My choice of works to study here is largely personal. It is based on my prior involvement and fascination with these particular creations, my experience as a teacher of literature, and, by default, my inability to know the world of literature and art in toto. My choice of systems concepts to explore – such ideas as pursuit and distance, fusion, enmeshment, triangulation, double binds, autonomy and intimacy, differentiation, systemic dysfunction, transgenerational systems, the family multiverse, and others – is largely personal as well. They are

those concepts of family therapy with which I am most familiar and most intrigued, though not necessarily the most important or immediately relevant to the field.

Despite these limitations, the artifacts I've selected are still acknowledged masterpieces, spanning two millennia of western culture. They represent the major genres of fictive literature, as well as one of the most classic forms of the fine arts. Likewise, the family therapy concepts I've used in this investigation comprise a broad range of systemic ideas, including transgenerational, structural, strategic, Milanian, and constructivist viewpoints. Arguably, they represent several of the major conceptual frameworks developed in family therapy over the last thirty years.

#### THEORY AND TERMINOLOGY

Schools of thought in family therapy are not always easily distinguished from each other, however. The word "trans-" or "intergenerational," for example, has been applied by some writers to the work of both Bowen and Whitaker (Gurman & Kniskern, 1981), while other scholars, like Piercy and Sprenkle (1986), see these two figures as representing two separate therapeutic models. The same is true for many other systemic ideas.

Generally speaking, I've used the term "transgenerational" to refer to the work of Bowen (1985; Kerr & Bowen, 1988) and others (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1984; Stierlin, 1974) who, in one way or another, have concentrated on what Bowen (Bowen, 1985; Kerr & Bowen, 1988) has called the multi-generational transmission process of family symptomology. This is most apparent in my discussion of the *Laocoon*. I've used the term "structural," largely in the chapter on Kafka, but elsewhere also, to designate those thinkers who have concerned themselves primarily with the issue of structure in family dysfunction, such as Minuchin (1974) and his colleagues (Minuchin, Montalvo, Guerney, Rosman, & Schumer, 1967), as well as some of the work of Haley (1980) and Andolfi (1979).

In the chapters on *Six Characters*, and the *Laocoon*, I've employed the term "strategic" mainly to connote those concepts associated with the Brief Therapy model of the Mental Research Institute as described by Fisch, Weakland, & Segal (1982) – the idea of behavior as communication, and the ways in which problems are maintained through our attempts to solve them. Also in the chapter on the *Laocoon*, I've referred to the "Milanian" notion of the pseudostable and pseudofugitive child, based on one of the recent therapeutic discussions of Luigi Boscolo and Gianfranco Cecchin (Boscolo, Cecchin,

Hoffman, & Penn, 1987).

In my exploration of Jeffers' "The Purse-Seine," and other pieces, I've examined the concept of "pursuit-distancing" – the pull between our needs for intimacy and autonomy – as this essentially Bowenian idea is outlined in the work of both Fogarty (no date, a; no date, b) and Bowen (Bowen, 1985; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). And, in the chapter on *Six Characters*, the "constructivist" perspective I have taken is based largely on the writings of Mendez, Coddou, and Maturana (1988), as well as several other thinkers (Glaserfeld, 1988; Hoffman, 1988; Maturana, 1988; May; 1977; Reidl, 1984; Watzlawick, 1984) regarding the ways in which we "construct" our understanding of reality based on our own biological structure and experience, rather than from direct contact with the world "out there."

Though these choices clearly are not free from personal bias, there is no single theoretical approach I have intentionally tried to favor. Where possible, I have examined the works in question from several theoretical stances, in order to compare and contrast the insights offered by each viewpoint.

Finally, throughout this study, in my use of the term "systemic," I do not mean to delineate only ideas belonging to a particular family therapy model – Haley as opposed to Bowen, for example – or only a



particular group of family therapies, as some writers might (see, for example, Auwerswald, 1987). Rather, following Cottone (1989), who published a detailed discussion of the systemic paradigm, I have used the terms *systemic* and *systems* in their more general sense to describe a conceptual focus on relational, rather than individual, processes.

#### METHOD

So few systemic studies of literature and art have been made that no generally accepted methodology really exists. And while the practice of pathography in psychoanalytic criticism is well established, its value for this investigation is limited, since my purpose is not to examine the family lives of the creators of the works I have chosen, but to analyze the works themselves. Nonetheless, I have inferred a method from those family studies of literature that do exist, and from similar psychological and psychoanalytic writings. And, where necessary, I've attempted to devise a methodology as I have proceeded from other pertinent resources.

#### *The Clinical Approach*

The methodology most easily inferred from previous systems interpretations of literature, such as Lipton (1984) or Bateman's (1985)

analyses of *Death of a Salesman*, (and a strategy used commonly in the psychoanalytic literature) is the clinical approach. In it, one envisions the work as if it contained a clinical problem to be solved.

This method is outlined by Lipton (1984) in his study of *Death of a Salesman*. "The family theory approach," to literary analysis, he writes,

observes the interpersonal interactions and makes note of systems data that emerge from close observations of the [literary] family. These systems data reveal the family's differentiation patterns, triangling situations, dimensions of loyalty and autonomy, issues regarding separation and individuation, and extra familial, cultural factors that affect a family's functioning. (p. 60)

This is the approach taken by Bateman (1985), in her analysis of the same play, in which she tracks the multi-generational issues in the Loman family and their problems of differentiation. And, by and large, it is the method I have employed here.

Such a strategy is based in part on "close reading" (see McGuire, 1973) of the text, and the assumption that the character's precise actions and statements, and the contexts of those actions and statements, have potentially important meanings, just as in therapy we assume that these

elements contain important information (Haley, 1987; Fisch, Weakland, & Segal, 1982.) This is also the assumption originally made by Freud (1914/1958b) in his examination of Michelangelo's sculpture of Moses on the tomb of Pope Julius, in which he suggested that a clear understanding of the work required careful attention to what otherwise might be regarded as "insignificant details."

In this sense, Freud's analysis of the *Moses* was something of a transposition of "close reading" to a work of sculpture, and is largely the method I have followed in the chapter on the *Laocoon*. Here, one cannot rely on dialogue or words to suggest meaning. Yet again, family therapy, with its emphasis on using spatial terms such as distance or closeness or enmeshment or fusion or differentiation or even family "sculpting" (Papp, Silverstein, & Carter, 1973) to suggest emotional relationships, can be readily translated into sculptural form. This transposition of terminology was also the approach taken by Schneider (1985) in her study of the sculpture of Henry Moore, in which she examined symbiosis and differentiation by noting the relative positions of figures in his work, and tracking the extent to which the figures were or were not physically separate forms.

*The Use of Previous Commentaries*

Additionally, I've used earlier psychoanalytic and artistic criticisms of the works I've chosen as a further means of defining the systemic issues involved. This is less a method I have seen used by others (though Freud [1914/1958b] and Lipton [1984] employ it also) than one which my preliminary research and suggestions from colleagues indicated would be valuable.

In my initial explorations of *Six Characters*, for example, I discovered through a reviewer at *Family Process* that one earlier commentator had already raised questions about the play as a metaphor for psychoanalysis. Thus, in this chapter, I have extended this analogy into a discussion of the play as a metaphor for family therapy. Similarly, in my examination of the *Laocoon*, one of the avenues I found for uncovering systemic insight into the work lay in some of the confusing statements made by previous scholars, in particular their remarks about the purpose of the serpents. In seeking a systemic basis for these contradictions (as Freud [1914/1958b] sought a psychoanalytic explanation for the contradictions he revealed among earlier critics of the *Moses*), I have found systems data which had not been apparent earlier.

*Cross-disciplinary Research*

Ultimately, as with any cross-disciplinary research, my own critical judgment is the major analytic instrument. Thus, as Guba (1978) and others (Mintzberg 1979; Smith, 1984) might point out regarding all naturalistic inquiry, there has been no way to predict precisely in advance what I might discover in any given piece. My discussion in this sense is exploratory, my hypothesis simply that family therapy, like other psychotherapies, can be used as a method to explore art and literature, and that literature and art embody concepts from family therapy. I have therefore devoted a final section to some of the more general implications of my analysis, including a further discussion of methods, and issues for future research.

## GOALS AND LIMITATIONS

Given the relatively unusual character of this investigation, it is important to bear in mind what it will not accomplish. It will not yield definitive interpretations of the works explored, or explications that summarily replace previous analyses. Nor can it, because of my own biases and limited understandings, be a fair test of the applicability of one school of family therapy's ideas against another's, even though one model may seem more pertinent than a rival school to a given piece, or

perhaps appear more useful for artistic analysis. My purpose here is simply to suggest how a family therapist might view several works of imaginative writing and art, noting what new about the artifact may be explained by this, and indicating, as Framo (1982) has predicted, what else about the nature of families or therapy may be confirmed or uncovered.

## *SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR:*

### A CONSTRUCTIVIST VIEW<sup>1</sup>

Our study begins with an exploration of Luigi Pirandello's (1952) play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. Extremely difficult to fathom in many ways, it was greeted, according to Bentley (1952), by a "*succes de scandale*" (p. 378) when it opened in Rome in 1921, while today it is commonly viewed as existential, as "metatheater," or as a dramatic illustration of the unknowable nature of reality (Wilkie & Hurt, 1988). Yet, as Bentley (1986) also notes, "There can be little doubt about what Pirandello is possessed by: elemental family relationships," and, in the play, he has brought those relationships "to passionate life" (p. 61).

From a constructivist perspective, it is a deeply revealing drama about families and the "versa" they create, as Mendez, Coddou, and Maturana (1988, p. 153) might put it. It is similarly the story of a family's interactions as a "network of sufferings" (Mendez et al., 1988, p. 159), and of the "bringing forth of its pathology," the way in which our linguistic descriptions of ourselves as "pathological" create the impression of objectively verifiable problems, even when many of such problems may exist only, so to speak, in our own heads, and cannot be

found in an objective reality.

It is the story too of the unknowable nature of causality (Watzlawick, 1984), the arbitrary character of our punctuations of our experience (Reidl, 1984), and of the breakdown of a family's autopoiesis – the ability of a system to conserve it's own organization, described in biological terms by Maturana and Varela (1987). My aim in the pages that follow is to trace these ideas through this drama, and to discuss the therapeutic implications those ideas may hold.

*SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR*

The work itself opens in mid-stream, as it were, with the curtain raised and a deserted stage. "N.B.," say the stage directions,

The comedy is without acts or scenes. The performance is interrupted once, without the curtain being lowered, when the manager and the chief characters withdraw to arrange the scenario. A second interruption of the action takes place when, by mistake, the stage hands let the curtain down.... The spectators will find the curtain raised and the stage as it usually is during the day time. It will be half dark, and empty, so that from the beginning the public may have the impression of an impromptu performance.



(Pirandello, 1952, pp. 211-212)

We are given to believe that we have arrived in the middle things, that we have almost stumbled unintentionally on an afternoon rehearsal by a group of actors and their manager of a play called "Mixing It Up."

All this seems, quite explicitly, a Pirandellian statement on the arbitrary nature of the ways in which we "punctuate," in Batesonian terms (May, 1977), or frame, our experience, and conceive of time and causality. We enter the theater, of course, believing that we "know" when the play begins because the curtain will go up, and we will differentiate scenes and understand when it will be time to go to the lobby for some air, or time to applaud, return to our cars, and drive home, because the curtain will go down, the houselights will go on, and perhaps the actors will take final bows. These are the conventional ways in which theatrical experiences are marked.

Yet omitting them as Pirandello does raises large questions about the validity of our epistemology, of how securely we know what we think we know. For without such "punctuations," how can we be sure when the play really "begins," or "ends?" And if we cannot be sure when it begins, then how will we "tell" time in it? Has time in the play, as in all of life, already "begun" before we arrive on the scene, whether or not the curtain is up or down? And if we cannot then be certain when time

"begins," either in life or in the play, is it then possible for us ever to know such things as "conclusion" or "cause?"

Far more radical attempts to break down the "fourth wall" of the theater in the seven decades since *Six Characters* was first produced may weaken our appreciation of the importance of these aspects of the play. For we do, as a rule, manage to arrive at a performance of the work "on time," and find our seats, retire to the lobby at intermission, applaud at the play's "end," and return to our homes, in an age when some experimental dramas take place impromptu in the streets. Yet Oliver (1979) notes that it was largely the way in which *Six Characters* challenged its first audience's ideas of reality and theatrical convention, and not simply the fact that it dealt with explicit sexual themes, that provoked the near riot that occurred at its premiere, and forced Pirandello to flee the theater in a cab. Just as constructivism does not deny the possibility that we may know things, but challenges *how* we believe we know them (Glaserfeld, 1988), so Pirandello in this way challenges the "how" of our knowledge.

"Nothing in this play," writes Pirandello (1952), "exists as given and pre-conceived. Everything is in the making, is in motion, is a sudden experiment" (p. 373). And it is precisely this quality of the work which, as with its first audience, may shake the security of our own

understanding of our own experience, by suggesting to us, as Reidl (1984) says, that "...our expectation that there are such things as causality and finality may be a need, but at the same time a totally erroneous expectation of the human mind" (p. 73). We are, in this sense, "structured" to conceive the play in these terms, as Maturana and Varela (1987) would observe, but our being structured to conceive it in this way has nothing to do with what the play necessarily *is*, only with what we think it should be.

Throughout the drama, the juxtaposition of our formal expectations with the play itself continues. The "play" the actors who first enter are rehearsing is soon interrupted by the arrival of a family: Father, Mother, Step-daughter, Son, Boy, and Child, bringing with them – bringing forth in themselves, perhaps – a play of their own that they are desperate to act out.

They are, they explain, six characters abandoned by the playwright who gave them birth, and they have come, as the Father states, "...in search of an author.... Any author," (Pirandello, 1952, p. 215) who will allow their characters to be presented. "We want," says the Father, "to live" (p. 218), and to live means to tell their story.

Their entrance immediately confronts us with yet another vision of the reality we thought that we had "known." For how can they appear

*without* an author, without some authority who "establishes" their reality for us in the same manner that, as Maturana (1988) suggests, we may frequently believe some "higher authority" always validates our daily reality – science, perhaps, which "proves" the facts of our living, or religion, which "transcends" it, or logic, which "unifies" it, or history, which "verifies" it.

And yet the characters are there, without such authority, and not only merely present – they *speak*, much to the consternation of the manager and actors, who have, like the viewer, difficulty grasping what is going on.

But it is in their speech that the question of their reality is most directly answered, for "everything said is said by someone" (Maturana & Varela, 1987, p. 135), and, authorless or not, with or without scripted lines, this is no less true of the characters than of ourselves.

"Let's hear them out," says the Manager (Pirandello, 1952, p. 222), and in so saying he reveals the deeper basis of the characters' existence, despite our – and the characters' – concern with their "authorship." For "we human beings exist (as such) only in language," as Mendez et al. (1988, p. 155) observe, and it is the characters' speech that makes them real to us and to themselves as well.

Yet their speech also identifies another aspect of the problematic

nature of what is real. "But don't you see," says the Father, that the whole trouble lies here. In words, words. Each one of us has within him a whole world of things, each man of us his own special world. And how can we ever come to an understanding if I put in the words I utter the sense and value of things as I see them; while you who listen to me must inevitably translate them according to the conception of things each one of you has within himself. We think we understand each other, but we never really do.

(Pirandello, 1952, p. 224)

The father here has laid out the essential constructivist dilemma: the worlds that we bring forth in our language are always our own worlds, and not another's. Thus, given that, how can we ever live harmoniously with others, as families, as couples, as neighbors, friends?

It is this dilemma that also explains the desire for the "author" the characters say they are searching for. For an author would construct a single language and therefore a single reality for everyone, a *universe* rather than a "multiverse," as Mendez et al. (1988, p. 153) say, a single world brought forth in the family rather than their separate realities. For a group of *characters*, an author by definition would control *all* language through a single script, retaining what was

harmonious to the author's ideas, while discarding all contradictions.

It is typical of many families in distress, of course, to search for such authors, to seek a single reality, to wish to discard the reality of their own multiverse, though not all distressed families may behave this way. But it is a common enough basis for power struggles within dyads and families, and it exists on the simplest levels: the everyday, invalidating demands to "don't say that!" or "don't talk that way." For the acceptance of another's reality is a risk that is all too often too difficult to take, since to many people it means inevitably losing one's own reality; while to control another's language is to control his or her world, and to establish one's own truth as supreme.

It is in this sense that the family Pirandello presents to us is a "problem determined system," in Anderson, Goolishian & Winderman's terms (1986), a family that has "diagnosed" itself as in need of something external to itself through its language and "brought forth" its own pathology (Mendez et al., 1988): its belief in its need for an author. And it has found willing professionals – the Manager and the actors – to confirm their self-diagnosis.

And yet it is in this sense as in many therapeutic settings that the family's diagnosis of each other as "the problem" and of the need for an authority to "fix things" is the difficulty. For an author for the

characters – just as any single authority of reality in real life – would inevitably invalidate what the characters have to say by replacing it instead with what the *author* has to say – she or he by definition would destroy the worlds each character has to bring forth. Just as the notion of the "beginning" of an event is always in some sense a distortion of the event, because time has no end or beginning, so the idea that there can only be one experience of an event, only one description – a single reality – likewise distorts the reality of all other experiences.

Such distortion and invalidation repeatedly occur throughout the play. Initially, it takes the form of the Manager and the actors simply attempting to "act" the characters' roles. As the characters tell their separate versions of the story that has brought them to the theater – the sordid tale of the father's having sent away the mother to live with another man many years ago, shortly after the birth of the Son, and of the subsequent complications that ensue – the actors attempt to take over the characters' parts. The other man, the former clerk of the Father, has died, and he has left the Mother, and the three children he has had by her, in poverty. The Father, by chance, has encountered the Step-daughter, reduced to prostitution, at a brothel. Recognizing the mother, a brothel seamstress, "in time," as he insists (though the Step-daughter says it was not "in time"), and realizing the young woman he

has just handed a hundred lira to his Mother's offspring, he has taken the four back into his household, plagued by "confounded aspirations toward a certain moral sanity" (Pirandello, 1952, p. 226).

Intrigued at the prospect of producing the tale, the Manager calls for the set man, the makeup man, and tells the prompter to take down their lines as the details of the story unfold. But when the Step-daughter says that she is nude at one point in the tale, the Manager screams at the prompter "Stop a minute! Stop! Don't write that down!" (p. 253). Like the "author," he wishes to control the Step-daughter's reality, to make her language fit with his own notions of what is permissible on stage. Later, when again the Manager attempts to change the Step-daughter's words, she protests, "but it's the truth!" "What does that matter," responds the Manager. "Acting is our business here. Truth up to a certain point, but no further" (p. 257).

Gradually, the ridiculous nature of it all becomes apparent, the attempt to recreate one reality of a tale with many sides, many versions. Carried away by the desire for authenticity, the Leading Lady, who is to play the part of the Step-daughter in the "acted" version of the family's tale, asserts to the Step-daughter that, when her costume is prepared, "I shall be [the Step-daughter], and much more effectively than you" (p. 254).



"Already," says the Father, pondering what it means to have others play at being him, "I begin to hear my own words ring false" (p. 243). "I admire your actors," he tells the Manager, "but they certainly are not us.... They want to be us, but they aren't all the same" (pp. 256-257).

What the actors and manager attempt to do to the characters, however, the characters have already done to themselves. Though they are aware, at moments, that their realities are separate, that their family is a Mendezian multiverse – "He thinks he has got at the meaning of it all," says the Son of the Father at one point, "Just as if each one of us in every circumstance of life couldn't find his own explanation of it!" (p. 239) – they constantly seek to assert one family member's reality over another, languaging themselves, as Mendez et al. (1988) would put it, not in terms of cooperation, "conversations of coordinations of actions" (p. 155), but in terms of "characterization, accusation, and recrimination" (p. 159) – language that allows for only a single view of a given person, a single view of a given motive or action, rather than for the multiplicity of views possessed by any group of people.

Repeatedly, for example, the family members oversimplify or implicitly deny each other's realities, while insisting on the supremacy of their own. To the Step-daughter, the mother is a "poor creature"

(Pirandello, 1952, p. 231) – a belittling characterization wearing a veil of charity, while to the Father, the scandal comes about "through her [the Mother's] stupidity" (p. 228) – an accusation. Both statements ultimately deny the complexity and wholeness of the person being spoken about, the first, by making her a victim who is responsible for nothing, the second by making her a dolt who is responsible for everything.

In like manner, the Boy to the Step-daughter is a "little fool" (p. 222), while the Son for the Father is "a cynical imbecile" (p. 222). The Mother left the Father, she says, because "He forced me to it, and I call God to witness it" (p. 222) – another appeal to an authority – the "Author of Us All," as it occasionally is phrased – to validate her version of reality against all others. Bentley (1986), in fact, sees the search for an author as on one level a search for God.

It is in this way, through their insistence that each holds the only truth possible regarding not only himself but the other family members, that their existence together constitutes a "network of sufferings" (Mendez et al., 1988, p. 159), "a dance" not of tolerance and multiple realities but of "objectivity without parentheses" (p. 150) – the view that there can only be one view. As Mendez et al. (1988) have commented,

... when suffering arises in a family there are as many

realities of malfunctioning brought forth as members it has. Furthermore, within our culture, usually each member of a family experiences his or her versa in objectivity without parenthesis as the *universe* [original italics], and, accordingly, lives the interactions through which he or she constitutes it in terms of assessments that imply a grasp on an absolute reality: "I am right, and you are wrong." It is very infrequent that the members of a family should operate implicitly or explicitly with objectivity in parenthesis, accepting their different versa as legitimate different domains of existence. (pp. 157-58)

The family we are given in *Six Characters in Search of An Author* thus is a family ironically seeking an unattainable ontology, an objective reality, in the very midst of a play which from its opening scene denies that possibility. There can, in this sense, be no single reality any more than there can be a real "conclusion" to the play or a "break" in its action. "Life," writes Pirandello (1988),

is a continuous flow which we continually try to stop, to fix in our concepts and ideals. But inside ourselves, in what we call our soul, the flow continues indistinctly, under the wire, past the limits that we set when we formed

consciousness and built a personality. During certain stormy moments, inundated by the flow, all our fictitious forms collapse ignominiously. (p. 1664)

Inundated by life, the family in *Six Characters* ultimately falls apart. In their attempt to fix each other's moments, to find the "causes" of their troubles in someone other than themselves, they ultimately lose what is essential for any family to survive, for any system's autopoiesis (Maturana & Varela, 1987) – the "effective (sincere) desire and will for coexistence" (Mendez et al., 1988, p. 150).

Foretelling the end of their unendable story, the Father, speaking first of the Boy, then of the Child, states (Pirandello, 1952),

He disappears soon, you know. And the baby too. She is the first to vanish from the scene. The drama consists finally in this: when that mother reenters my house, her family born outside of it, and shall we say superimposed on the original, ends with the death of the little girl, the tragedy of the boy and the flight of the elder daughter. It cannot go on, because it is foreign to its surroundings. (p. 234)

The Boy and the Child, who are given no lines, no language in which to exist, literally cease to be – the Child drowned in a fountain, and the

Boy soon after committing suicide.

They are a family that lives – like many families – like most families? – outside objectivity in parentheses, outside the principle of uncertainty outlined by Heisenberg early in this century: that we can never know all about anything; we can never know all about the motion of the electron, nor can we know all of our own motion as well (Bronowski, 1973). Searching for an "author," as so many of us futilely do, they live outside Dreikurs' (no date) notion of the imperfect: that "as we are losing the authoritarian order in our society we lose more and more the authorities which establish absolute judgments," (p.2), and they remain unaware that "the real thing [a single reality] can't be seen" (p.2).

They are abetted in their folly (as troubled families are at times abetted by omniscient or overly responsible therapists) by the actors and Manager who believe that they can "be" the characters for them, since – to actors – reality is what they say it is – the solipsistic complement of the authoritarian demand that reality be the same for everybody.

The characters suffer because they are unable to move, like so many families, to a domain of existence beyond a single truth, where "the issue is not any more who is right and who is wrong but whether or not we want to coexist" (Mendez et al., 1988, p. 150) even though they,

like all truly tragic figures, are aware that what they want – an "authority" to give them a single reality – is not really what they need. "For each one of us," says the Father, "has his own reality to be respected before God, even when it is harmful to one's very self" (Pirandello, 1952, p. 234).

Yet he is unable to put his own desire for an objectively knowable reality in parentheses for very long. "Our reality doesn't change," (p. 235) he insists on the next page, as if time will never pass for them, as if the same "play" – their lives – can be "performed" twice, rather than remaining always, as Pirandello subtitles his drama, "in the making" – as life remains in the making, beyond any single view of it and any single truth, for all of us.

#### ALTERNATIVE VIEWS

While it is possible to "bring forth" a constructivist view of the play, it is obviously not the only valid way it may be seen. "It is appropriate to this play," writes Bentley (1986), "that one finds oneself proposing different ways of looking at it" (p. 67), and one can readily imagine how different points of view might yield differing observations and interpretations.

*Alternative Family Systems Points of View*

A structural (Minuchin, 1974; Minuchin et al., 1967) view of the play might find that the central issue was not the family members' differing constructions of reality, but the disorganization of the sibling and executive subsystems. Like Bentley (1986), from this point of view, we might see not a single family system, but two: the original family of the Father, the Mother, and the Son, and the second family of the now dead clerk, the Mother, Step-daughter, Child, and the Boy. We might even see them blending into a third family after the father takes the mother and her children by the clerk back into his house, a combination that disintegrates into the original trio again after the deaths of the Child and the Boy, and the Step-daughter's flight from the stage. (Bentley [1986] speaks of the clerk's family as being "killed off" [p. 67]).

A more Bowenian (Bowen, 1985; Kerr & Bowen, 1988) lens might examine the triangulation of the Step-daughter with the Mother and Father, or the Son with the Mother and Step-daughter, and note the lack of differentiation among the characters, as well as the emotional fusion between the characters and the acting troupe. A strategic (Fisch, Weakland, & Segal, 1982) study, on the other hand, might be much more concerned with the way that the family members' attempts to solve their dilemmas keep them stuck in their misery, and how the efforts of the

actors to help them only appear to have increased their difficulties.

*Psychoanalytic Commentaries*

Psychoanalysts who have examined *Six Characters* have generally focused on the issues of Pirandello's unconscious impulses as they are disguised in the play. Kligerman (1962), for example, has viewed the play as an artistic veil for the events of Pirandello's own life. Thus Pirandello's struggle with the issue of whether or not to "send away" his own wife, who appears to have suffered from psychotic delusions, to a sanatorium (as he eventually did), and his close relationship with his daughter Lietta, whom his wife accused of trying to "replace her as lady of the house" (p. 738), are, for Kligerman, the likely basis for the Father's struggles in the play with sending away the Mother, and with his problematic feelings for the Step-daughter.

Though Pirandello (1952) explicitly denied any connection between his life and the Father in *Six Characters* in his 1925 preface to the play, to Kligerman (1962) "this strenuous protest protests too much" (p. 736) and only deepens his sense of the unconscious connection between the playwright's art and life. Seen from this perspective, the brothel scene in the play is a disguised expression of the incestuous tensions which could not be openly acknowledged that ran



through Pirandello's own family and were exacerbated by his wife's illness. And the disavowal of the characters by their author, Kligerman states, "makes us think of the disavowal which regularly goes on in regard to dreams" (p. 735) in which we deny impulses whose recognition would be painful to us. The characters are thus split off parts of Pirandello's own self which, like dream figures, he was unable to accept in everyday life.

Wangh (1976) takes this issue further, in attempting to explain the effect of the play upon the audience, by suggesting that it is Pirandello's "special achievement" to have represented in the play "the layering of defenses and resistances against the open revelation and carrying out of jealous and rageful acts" (p. 324). He sees the fragmented structure of the play less as an expression of the ambiguous nature of reality, than as analogous to the fragmentation the analyst "sees in patients whose rage must be held at bay and who fragment each thought for fear of the magic or real action to which it might lead" (p. 325).

Pierloot (1987), while acknowledging the parallels between Pirandello's life and the events of the play, takes a somewhat different perspective. *Six Characters* for him is "an imaginative representation of a situation of people, suffering from mental distress and imploring

help" (p. 221).

"Beyond the conscious meaning of characters looking for an author," Pierlout states, "we assume the unconscious meaning of an author confronted with the imaginary situation of mentally disturbed people, wanting to be helped by discovering a meaning to their lives" (p. 223). Thus for him, the play represents less Pirandello's struggles with his unconscious desires as his fruitless attempts to make sense of the events of his life, in particular his wife's madness. Moreover, the characters' search for an author, from this perspective, becomes basically analogous to the search of the analysand for an analyst.

"In many ways," Pierlout continues, "the psychoanalyst can be compared to an author, offering a new sense of existence of a person, by creating a meaningful life history" (p. 223). In this vein, Pierlout is remarkably similar to Bentley (1986), who, though not an analyst, suggests that "the six are trying to pull all this baggage of theirs, as the patient does on the doctor's couch, from the dim, anesthetic past into the garish, stinging present" (p. 76).

#### *SIX CHARACTERS AND CONSTRUCTIVIST*

#### *FAMILY THERAPY*

A constructivist approach is not "better" than these

interpretations. It simply raises somewhat different, though in many ways related, questions. Like Pierloot and, in part, Bentley, the constructivist view that I have outlined here looks at the play as a metaphor for therapy. And, like Pierloot, it envisions the author whom the characters are searching for as comparable to a type of therapist – not the analyst with the analysand, but the family therapist faced with a complex and changing family. But, unlike Pierloot's discussion, it is a reading that in the end suggests a warning about at least two of the roles the therapist may assume: the therapist as the omniscient Author, or the therapist as the Manager.

### *The Therapist as Author and as Manager*

The therapist as Author – as in the "Author" of the title – is a part that simply cannot be played. For the Author of the title, who gave the characters life and who presumably knows the "truth" behind their problems and the "real" meaning of their lives, simply does not exist, anymore than the therapist who really knows the "truth" about the family who consults her, or the objective nature of its problems, exists in the clinical world. Both parts, on the stage and in everyday life, simply are beyond our grasp.

And the therapist as Manager (whom, as Bentley [1986] notes, the

family tries to make into a defacto author), while a part that can be enacted, is a role that ultimately ends in futility and frustration. For in attempting to create a script for the characters that exists apart from them, and to take control of their story from them, the Manager loses sight of the fact that his reality is no more valid or secure than theirs, even if in context it seems preferable. "The Director's [Manager's] outer world," writes Bentley (1986), "is reduced to rituals that preserve the appearances and maintain the occasion, habits, routines, cliches" (p. 70). It is as "unreal" as the characters, in the sense that it is lifeless. Unable in the final analysis to manage anything, unable to tell what he thinks is real from what he thinks is not, the Manager exclaims at the play's close "Pretence? Reality? To Hell with it all! Never in my whole life has such a thing happened to me. I've lost a whole day over these people, a whole day!" (Pirandello, 1952, p. 276).

Pirandello (1952), in his preface, writes that he has presented the characters not only in their own family drama, "but in another play which they don't know and don't suspect the existence of" (p. 373) – in a sense, he has presented them in a kind of dramatic parentheses. Yet, as Bentley (1986) wisely points out, the playwright has done the same with the Manager and Actors. "To realize what Pirandello is up to," he notes, "we not only have to see both [the characters and the acting

company] but the constant reaction of one upon the other" (p. 76).

Together, they have created a third play that neither can control alone, just as the family and the therapist each brings their and her own drama into therapy, from which another entirely different play is constructed, a therapeutic drama whose full control by either party is equally impossible. The therapist, however, who remains unaware of this larger drama, and who attempts to unilaterally "manage" therapy, believing in her connection with a "higher" reality, may well end up, like the Manager of *Six Characters*, rejecting the family entirely for having "wasted" her day.<sup>2</sup>

### *The Therapist as author in Parentheses*

We are left, finally, with having to create a different sort of therapeutic role than the unsuccessful therapeutic metaphors offered by this reading of the play. It is a role that still must grapple with the suffering of families in serious distress, but that no longer can rely on the notion that its authority can be spelled with a capital A, or can exist outside of the therapist herself in her interaction with a family.

Hoffman (1988), in attempting to outline a constructivist position for family therapy, has created a description of such a role, which, if tentative and imperfect in her view, at least presents a clear contrast to

the roles described in Pirandello's drama. This therapeutic role, she writes,

avoids the implication of fixing something that has broken down or is not functioning, and comes closer to some kind of hopeful discourse. It is, as far as possible, non-judgemental [sic] and non-pejorative. It is not control oriented. It is lateral rather than hierarchical in structure. It is wary of an instructive stance. It shrinks away from an influence that is primarily intentional. It is pluralistic in nature, focusing on many views, rather than one. There is no assumption of objectivity or truth. (p. 127)

In this role, therapy itself is not a strategy for change or differentiation, but (as Pierloot [1987] might suggest) a "meaning process" (Hoffman, 1988, p. 117), whose aim is to help the members of the family do what the family in *Six Characters* finds so difficult to do: "adopt the perspective of other people or entertain a dialogue" (p. 118).

"The therapist," Hoffman suggests, "tries to allow everyone's private reality to be understood" (p. 125), that private reality that the Father states is to be "respected before God" (Pirandello, 1952, p. 234). In so doing, the therapist does not encourage solipsism, suggesting that the *only* reality that matters is each individual's, but instead attempts to

break solipsism and isolation down, helping the members of the family to see the validity of each other's point of view, and the ways that each point of view may be painful to or confirming of another, and how any two might interface with a third.

In the context of *Six Characters*, such a role might entail helping the Father to see the partial validity of the Mother's contention that he forced her out, and helping her to see the partial truth of his assertion that he felt forced by her to do it. It might similarly attempt to help the parents and Son understand the bases for their mutual resentment, and help all three characters express their differing, and unexpressed, constructions of the deaths of the clerk, and the children, and the flight of the Step-daughter. The dead, finally, might be buried, and the fugitive let free to run, even if each of the three remaining characters buried each of the dead in a different grave, and each saw the Step-daughter as fleeing from a different stage. Whether they remained together or not is not the issue, for they would be finally free to explore their desire for coexistence, rather than feeling welded together merely by mutual pain. They would have found and heard the meanings they each held within themselves, and no longer be in need of an author. Their "play" would have been produced for themselves, and they would no longer need to act it out. They could, in short, cease to

be mere characters, living within fixed and prescribed roles, becoming instead flexible and human.

Such a process could only be undertaken, however, by a therapist able to adopt the part of author parenthetically, working not on the assumption that reality is something "out there" for us to grasp (Shields, 1986), but is itself inherent in the way that we construct the experience of our individual lives.

#### SUMMARY

The constructivist view of *Six Characters* undertaken here is simply that, a single constructivist view. As a view different from others, it is, as Bentley (1986) suggests, "likely to have its peculiar advantage" (p.67), though that advantage will not necessarily be larger than any other. What it does seem to provide, in conjunction with other perspectives, is an example of the constructed nature of realities within families, and a warning of how therapists, unaware of their own constructions of reality, may meet with frustration and failure in their interactions with families in distress. Yet it also may provide us, by implication, with guidance for how we may conduct therapy in a manner that validates both the families with whom we work, and ourselves as therapists.



STRUCTURAL AND OTHER SYSTEMS ELEMENTS IN  
KAFKA'S *THE METAMORPHOSIS*

If Pirandello's play seems to exemplify central issues of constructivism, Franz Kafka's (1915/1968) novella, *The Metamorphosis*, appears to ask us, in my own view, to turn our thoughts in a different direction. For, while it raises similar questions about the nature of reality, it focuses less on the differing visions of the world that may be held by family members, than on the hyper-symptomatic behavior of a single member of a family, and the larger structural systems in which it occurs.

Since its publication in 1915, *The Metamorphosis* has, like *Six Characters*, fascinated and bewildered readers and commentators from several countries and various frames of reference. For the literary critic, Harold Bloom (1988), it is "universally regarded as one of the central stories of our spiritual and literary age" (p. vii). Writers have addressed its psychological and autobiographical qualities (Hoffman, 1974; Jofen, 1978; Fichter, 1987; Scherr, 1987), its literary daring (Luke, 1983; Greenberg, 1988), and its existential and Marxist themes (Greenberg, 1988; Sokel, 1988).

Many, like Hoffman (1974) or Brand (1976), have emphasized the

tortured relationship between Gregor Samsa, the protagonist of *The Metamorphosis*, and his father, and pointed to parallels between this relationship and Kafka's own troubled connection with his father, Hermann. No scholars to my knowledge, however, have explored this novella from a systems point of view, and that is my intention here.

#### *THE METAMORPHOSIS*

Seldom has a tale opened more enigmatically than *The Metamorphosis*: "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed into a gigantic insect" (Kafka, 1915/1968, p. 7). Greenberg (1988) notes that in many ways this shock is the novella's climax, and the work, rather than building upwards, gradually dies away from here.

The reason for this sudden transformation is never explained. We learn only that Gregor, a traveling salesman who lives in an apartment in an unidentified city with his parents and his sister, and is working to pay off his parents' debts to his boss, simply opens his eyes one day to discover he is a monstrous vermin.

Initially, of course, Gregor believes that the change must all be a dream. He attempts to go back to sleep, but can not. Forced to accept the reality that he has become an insect, he nevertheless tries to

continue with life as if he were still the same Gregor he had been the previous day.

Heavenly Father! he thought. It was half-past six o'clock and the hands were quietly moving on, it was even past the half-hour.... The next train was at seven o'clock; to catch that he would need to hurry like mad and his samples weren't even packed up, and he himself wasn't feeling particularly fresh and active.... Well, supposing he were to say he was sick? But that would be most unpleasant and look suspicious, since during his five years' employment he had not once been ill. (Kafka, 1915/1968, p. 11)

As Sokel (1988) points out, Gregor is a man so completely self-alienated that even finding out one day that he has literally become a bug does not seem to him to be a good enough excuse for taking a day off from work. He allows himself no time at all to ponder his situation, to consider what has really happened to him. Instead, like the perfectly other-directed individual he is, he thinks only of what his employers will say when they find out he is late, and gives himself no time to reflect on his transformation.

Soon, through the locked door of his bedroom, his mother is calling for him to get up – "Hadn't you a train to catch?" she says.

Then shortly afterwards comes his father and his sister, Grete – "Gregor, open the door, do" (Kafka, 1915/1968, p. 13). All the while, Gregor, unused to his new body with its uncontrollable "numerous little legs" (p. 15), and unable to speak to his family in a recognizable human voice, is struggling simply to get out of bed.

Presently there is a knock at the front door. It is the chief clerk of Gregor's firm, coming to find out where he is. "Mr. Samsa," calls the chief clerk through the door of Gregor's room, "what's the matter with you?... I beg you to give me an immediate and precise explanation" (p. 25).

Gregor, of course, cannot possibly explain what has happened, for, as Greenberg (1988) notes, "the last thing he knows about is himself" (p. 22). Struggling with his entomian mandibles to open his door,

He meant actually to open the door, actually to show himself and speak to the chief clerk; he was eager to find out what the others, after all their insistence, would say at the sight of him. If they were horrified then the responsibility was no longer his and he could stay quiet. But if they took it calmly, then he had no reason either to be upset, and could really get to the station for the eight

o'clock train if he hurried. (p. 29)

When he does show himself, the reaction is immediate. His mother falls unconscious before him, the chief clerk backs out the door and out of the building, and his father, grabbing the walking stick the chief clerk has dropped in his terror, drives Gregor back into his room like an animal tamer, where Gregor is confined for most of the rest of the story.

He is thus cut off in the most basic way from his job and his family. He has had no intimate friends – as a traveling salesman he has had no time for that. For the last five years he has thought of nothing but his work, not going out in the evening, just sitting at the dining room table after supper, as his mother tells the chief clerk, "reading a newspaper or looking through railway timetables" (p. 23). With his metamorphosis, even these connections are denied him. Though once his family's sole support, he has become simply a useless bug, underfoot and embarrassing.

Grete, Gregor's seventeen year old sister, at first tries to care for him. She brings him suitable food for his new form, and tries to arrange his room more appropriately for him. Her ministrations make a certain sense, for we learn that Gregor had harbored secret hopes of sending his sister, an accomplished violinist, to conservatory.

Yet, a month after his transformation, she still is distressed at the

sight of him, even when she sees "the small portion of his body that stuck out from under the sofa" (p. 67) where he hides when she comes in his room. "This made him realize how repulsive the sight of him still was to her, and that it was bound to go on being repulsive" (p. 67). So sensitive is Gregor to her discomfort, and so indifferent to his own, that he contrives to arrange a sheet over the sofa edge so that he will be completely invisible when she comes in to feed him.

Meanwhile, cut off from the income Gregor's work provided, the other members of the family, who had been strikingly indolent prior to his metamorphosis, undergo a transformation of their own. The household cook is released, the servant girl replaced by a charwoman, and the family takes in three lodgers. Gregor's aging father, whose business failure five years ago was the reason for Gregor's becoming a traveling salesman, takes a job as a bank messenger, wearing his uniform even in his sleep. His mother, who suffers from asthma, nevertheless takes in mounds of sewing for an underwear manufacturer. And his young sister, who in Gregor's eyes was "still a child ... whose life hitherto had been so pleasant" (p. 63), becomes a salesclerk in a department store.

Through all this, Gregor remains haunted by the notion that he will once again return to his former self, that "he would take the family's

affairs in hand again just as he used to do" (p. 93) and again become its savior. But the situation in fact deteriorates rapidly.

Wounded by an apple thrown at him by his father in a fight shortly before the release of the servant girl and the arrival of the lodgers, he becomes progressively more morose. His room becomes a dumping ground for all the family's detritus, "The ashcan likewise and the kitchen garbage can." His sister's attentions are soon replaced by the charwoman's, "who did everything in a hurry" (p. 99).

Gregor himself begins to leave the food that is brought to him untouched. Watching the lodgers eat in the dining room while his father, mother and sister take their supper in the kitchen, he remarks on his inability to satisfy his hunger. "'I'm hungry enough,' said Gregor sadly to himself, 'but not for that kind of food. How these lodgers are stuffing themselves, and here I am dying of starvation'" (p. 103).

The same evening that Gregor watches the lodgers at supper, he hears his sister playing the violin in the kitchen. Overcome by the beauty of the music, an art he has never admired before, he ventures again beyond his door. The lodgers, mortified at the sight of him, give notice on the spot. Grete, Gregor's erstwhile protector, overwhelmed by the strain of his transformation on the family, now becomes his antagonist.

'He must go,' cried Gregor's sister, 'that's the only solution, Father. You must try to get rid of the idea that this is Gregor. The fact that we've believed it for so long is the root of all our trouble.... As it is, this creature persecutes us, drives away our lodgers, obviously wants the whole apartment to himself and would have us all sleep in the gutter.' (p. 115)

Locked by his family back inside his room, Gregor again responds in perfectly ego-alien fashion to his sister's desire to be rid of him.

He thought of his family with tenderness and love. The decision that he must disappear was one that he held even more strongly than his sister, if that were possible. In this state of vacant and peaceful meditation he remained until the tower clock struck three in the morning. The first broadening of light in the world outside the window entered his consciousness once more. Then his head sank to the floor of its own accord and from his nostrils came the last faint flicker of his breath. (p. 119)

The next morning, the charwoman finds his lifeless body in his room and quickly throws it out with the other rubbish. Gregor's father, suddenly filled with new energy, orders the lodgers out of the apartment when



they appear for breakfast. Then all three of the remaining family members dare to do what Gregor had never done – take a day off from work.

Then they all three left the apartment together, which was more than they had done for months, and went by tram into the open country outside the town. The tram, in which they were the only passengers, was filled with warm sunshine. Leaning comfortably back in their seats they canvassed their prospects for the future, and it appeared on closer inspection that these were not at all bad, for the jobs they had got, which so far they had never really discussed with each other, were all three admirable and likely to lead to better things later on.... While they were thus conversing, it struck Mr. and Mrs. Samsa, almost at the same moment, as they became aware of their daughter's increasing vivacity, that in spite of the sorrow of recent times, which had made her cheeks pale, she had bloomed into a pretty girl with a good figure. They grew quieter and half unconsciously exchanged glances of complete agreement, having come to the conclusion that it would soon be time to find a good husband for her. And it

was like a confirmation of their new dreams and excellent intentions that at the end of their journey their daughter sprang to her feet first and stretched her young body. (p. 127).

#### STRUCTURAL AND OTHER SYSTEMS ELEMENTS

There is no one correct systemic way to explore this or any other work, of course. In my own mind, however, it does seem to be a story rich in structural (Minuchin, 1974; Minuchin et al., 1967) elements.

#### *Parental Children*

We might note first of all, for example, the classic way in which Gregor and his sister, Grete, embody the Minuchin, Montalvo, Guerney, Rosman, and Schumer (1967) concept of parental children. Discussing inner city families in which executive control by the parents has broken down, Minuchin et al. (1967) note that "The '*parental children*' to whom authority was allocated by the parents and/or the siblings became the source of reference for executive guidance and control" (p. 11, original italics).

This is clearly the case with both Gregor and Grete. It is Gregor, for example, who has assumed financial responsibility for his

parents' debts in the wake of his father's business failure, and who even has taken it upon himself to provide for his sister's future by sending her to a Conservatory where she can study violin, "a secret plan of his" (Kafka, 1915/1968, p. 59).

Indeed, in his own mind, he cannot even quit the job he hates, working for the chief clerk, until his parents' debts are paid. "Once I've saved enough money to pay back my parents' debts to him – that should take another five or six years – I'll do it without fail. I'll cut myself completely loose then. For the moment, though, I'd better get up, since my train goes at five" (p. 11) – even though "for the moment" he has been transformed into an insect!

Grete is similarly parentified after Gregor's transformation. It is she who cleans his room and feeds him, she who becomes the expert on his needs, she even who decides, in the face of both of her parents' apparent indecision, when it is time to "get rid of it" – time for her brother to die and be thrown out.

Mr. and Mrs. Samsa, by contrast, repeatedly (though not invariably) present themselves as ineffectual. Mr. Samsa has spent his mornings prior to Gregor's transformation sleeping and reading the newspapers, while his son has already been at work for hours. Mrs. Samsa, whenever she sees Gregor after his transformation – and when

his needs for her are greatest – either faints straightaway or becomes short of breath. Both parents, in the face of their children's needs for support and guidance, abdicate control.

"From the beginning,' write Minuchin and his colleagues (1967), speaking of the slum families whom they saw, "we were impressed by the fact that more than three-fourths of the families to which we had been exposed" – families in which children were parentified – "had no father or stable father figure" (p. 10), just as Mr. Samsa has been emotionally absent through most of the novella. Further, they went on,

The mothers seemed to see themselves as powerless, helpless, and overwhelmed by the children's demands....

When a child asked for guidance, the mother would respond with a counter-demand for the child's autonomy ... or she would *relinquish authority* to a sibling (p. 11, original italics)

as Mrs. Samsa, through her fainting, essentially asks Gregor to make it on his own, or, if he cannot, relies on Grete to take over for her.

Ironically, of course, the Samsas, like all parents who yield authority to their children, have *invited* their children to become parentified. Mrs. Samsa's fainting, seen in this light, is a quite specific parental request – almost a *command* – for Grete to deal with her

transmogrified son, and a relinquishing of parental power.

Similarly, both parents are perfectly capable of assuming executive authority when it comes to asking Gregor to be the man of the house – another demand for him to be autonomous. On the morning of his metamorphosis, they both are there to tell him he is late for his train and must get up so that he doesn't miss work. And, as we find out later in the novella, the collapse of Mr. Samsa's business was not so totally catastrophic as Gregor's father allowed him to think it was. Mr. Samsa has managed to save a few bonds and securities – enough for the family to live on for a year. Gregor, however, as Kafka (1915/1968) writes, "had been of the opinion that nothing at all was left over from his father's business, at least his father had never said anything to the contrary, and of course he had not asked him directly" (p. 59).

### *Family Boundaries*

The parents' giving up of their executive power also exemplifies the permeable intergenerational and other boundaries in the Samsa household. As Minuchin et al. (1967) observe in their Wiltwyck families, "The nature of the parents' power is confusing. The parents are at times in absolute, autocratic power and control; at other times, they feel completely helpless" (p. 219).

At one moment Gregor's father is an aging lump slumped in his chair, capable at best of eating breakfast and reading the paper, whom Gregor must rescue financially because he has been too devastated by the collapse of his business. The next he is a strong man in uniform, driving Gregor inexorably back into the prison of his room.

"And yet," thinks Gregor (Kafka, 1915/1968),  
and yet, could that be his father? The man who used to lie wearily sunk in bed whenever Gregor set out on a business journey; who welcomed him back of an evening lying in a long chair in a dressing gown; who could not really rise to his feet but only lifted his arms in greeting, and on the rare occasions when he did go out with the family, on one or two Sundays a year and on high holidays, walked between Gregor and his mother, who were slow walkers anyhow, even more slowly than they.... Now he was standing there in fine shape; dressed in a smart blue uniform with gold buttons ... his strong double chin bulged over the stiff high collar of his jacket; from under his bushy eyebrows his black eyes darted fresh and penetrating glances; his one time tangled white hair had been combed flat on either side of a shining and carefully exact part.

He pitched his cap, which bore a gold monogram, probably the badge of some bank, in a wide sweep across the whole room on to a sofa with the tails of his jacket thrown back, his hands in his trouser pockets, advanced with a grim visage toward Gregor [sic]. (p. 83)

The members of the Samsa household move constantly back and forth across parental and sibling boundaries – Grete is now sister, now mother, Gregor is now head of the house, now vermin, father is now incapacitated, now all business – assuming and relinquishing executive and sibling roles in a confusing and contradictory manner.

The family's boundaries are also violated from outside, most clearly by the characters of the chief clerk, and the three lodgers who come to stay with them after Gregor becomes an insect. In the opening passages of the book, when Gregor's parents are urging him to leave his bed, the chief clerk peremptorily usurps the family's authority by coming to the house unannounced and demanding from Gregor "*in the name of your parents ... an immediate and precise explanation*" for his tardiness (p. 25, my italics).

The lodgers likewise "set themselves at the top end of the table where Gregor and his father and mother had eaten their meals" as if they were now the rulers of the family, while the Samsas take their

meals in the kitchen like servants (p. 101). When Gregor's sister tries to practice her violin playing in the kitchen after dinner, the lodgers request that she come out and play for them. Mr. Samsa, unable to draw a clear line between his family's life and the lodgers' entertainment, immediately fetches her.

His sister quietly made everything ready to start playing; his parents, who had never let rooms before and so had an exaggerated idea of the courtesy due to lodgers, did not venture to sit down on their own chairs.... (p. 103)

### *Structural Enmeshment and Larger Systems*

The problems of family boundaries in *The Metamorphosis* are of course rooted not simply in a dysfunctional family structure, but in the dysfunction of the larger societal system. It is not merely that the boundaries between parents and children are too permeable and unclear, but the boundaries between the family and the larger society are also distorted or invalidated. This dual violation – the violation of the intergenerational boundaries within the family on the one hand, and the family's external boundaries on the other – exemplifies the structural concept of *enmeshment*, in which members of one system or sub-system become overly involved and even exploitative of members of



a system at a different hierarchical level.

In the case of Gregor's parents, this means, as Minuchin et al. (1967) phrase it, that "The usefulness of children as sources of feedback and as extensions of and reflections of [parental] self overrides any parental ability to perceive them as potential persons" (p. 221). The children exist for the parents' benefit, rather than for their own. Gregor is there to pay off their debts, not live a life for himself.

And for the chief clerk or the lodgers or the greater community in general, as Sokel (1988) suggests in his Marxist analysis of the story, the family is merely an extension and reflection of societal self, to be used or abused for the society's own ends, rather than regarded as worthwhile in itself, and entitled to run its own affairs. The family *exists* to provide the chief clerk with a son who will sacrifice himself for the firm; the family's furniture is for the *lodgers'* benefit, not their own. Even Grete's music, in the lodgers' view, is not for *Grete's*, but for their own pleasure. It is not, in essence, for the soul of the player, but for the outside world.

The larger society is thus *enmeshed* in the affairs of the family, just as, in the opening scenes of the story, we see the mother, father, and sister all enmeshed in the threads of Gregor's life – making sure he is still living his life for them. Gregor's transformation into an insect

is, in this regard, the clearest example of the degree of his enmeshment, and of the extent to which his life has no meaning of its own. He is simply vermin, existing at the whim of and for the service of those hierarchically above him. And, just as he has sacrificed himself for his parents' obligations, so his family has sacrificed itself to the desires of the society in which it is bound.

### *Coalitions and Triangles*

The members of the family and societal systems in *The Metamorphosis*, struggling to survive within structures where lines of authority seem arbitrary and where individual autonomy is devalued, attempt to maintain themselves through the only means they see available to them, the formation of coalitions and triangles.

We are initially confronted, for example, with the coalition of the parents and Grete attempting to force Gregor to open his door and leave for work, as if the consequences of his behavior were as much their concern as his own. Shortly thereafter, we see the parents attempting to form a coalition with the chief clerk against Gregor, in order, we may assume, to keep Gregor and Gregor's actions as the focus of the difficulty – to keep him, as he remains throughout the story, the identified patient – and to deflect attention from the original problem

of the parents' indebtedness to the chief clerk. And consistently, Gregor allows himself to be triangled into what is essentially a dispute between his parents and his boss, in which he has no real part.

Gregor too, however, attempts to form coalitions, particularly with his sister against his parents. His intention to send Grete to Conservatory, for example, is clearly designed to have her on his side, allied against his parents, who would be at the apex of this emotional triangle. As he listens to her playing her violin for the lodgers, the dimensions of his wish to have her as his ally become stunningly apparent.

He would never let her out of his room, at least, not so long as he lived; his frightful appearance would become, for the first time, useful to him; he would watch all the doors of his room at once and spit at intruders; but his sister would need no constraint, she would stay with him of her own free will.... (Kafka, 1915/1968, p. 107).

It is easy, reading this passage, to see in it Freudian elements of incestuous desires, or even the simple fairytale of "Beauty and the Beast," as Hoffman (1974) and other psychoanalytic critics point out. But it is equally valid to view it as the understandable impulse of a man who sees himself cut off from the world at every turn, seeking a human

alliance of any kind to sustain himself.

### *Gregor's Starvation*

There is a final element of the story that, from a structural standpoint, may draw our attention: Gregor's eventual self-starvation. Kafka repeatedly mentions Gregor's hunger and his inability to obtain suitable nourishment. "Gregor," Kafka (1915/1968) writes, "was now hardly eating anything. Only when he happened to pass the food laid out for him did he take a bit of something in his mouth as a pastime, kept it there for an hour at a time and usually spat it out again" (p. 99). "I'm hungry enough," says Gregor to himself, in the passage I have quoted earlier, "but not for that kind of food. How these lodgers are stuffing themselves, and here I am dying of starvation" (p. 103).

Manfred Fichter (1987), after studying Kafka's life and letters, including *The Metamorphosis* and the short story, "A Hunger Artist," concludes that Kafka himself suffered from atypical anorexia nervosa. And, though Kafka eventually died from tuberculosis, Gregor Samsa does die from hunger, and exhibits in addition overt anorectic symptoms.

He is, first of all, precisely the type of overfunctioning individual who is commonly identified in the anorectic literature (including the literature associated with males [Andersen, 1990]) as developing the

disorder, clearly demonstrating "the oversubmissiveness, abnormal considerateness, and lack of self-assertion" that, as Bruch (1978) notes, is "characteristic of anorexics" (p. 45). Gregor is compulsive about his work, has few outside contacts, and is rigidly controlled in his life and relationships. His habit of taking some food in his mouth "for an hour" before spitting it out seems reminiscent of anorectic purgation.

Moreover, as a metaphor, his view of his body as having the form of a "monstrous vermin" whose dimensions are "too broad" to negotiate an open doorway head on, suggests the most severe kind of body-image distortion and physical dissociation that, as Kearney-Cooke and Steichen-Asch (1990) observe, typifies sufferers of eating disorders.

Further, "The presence of such distinctive qualities as enmeshment, poor intergenerational boundaries, rigidity and problems in conflict resolution," as we have previously identified in the Samsa household, "defines the structure of the anorectic famil[y]" (Dare, Eisler, Russell, & Szmukler, 1990, p. 53). Like other victims of anorexia, control over his eating or not eating is virtually the only control Gregor has in his life. His food is brought to him by first his sister, then, after the father forbids this, the charwoman, and he is confined to his room for months at a time. Even before his metamorphosis, his life was basically run by his boss and his parents, and organized almost

exclusively around railway timetables.

Gregor's refusal to eat, as is so often the case in eating disorders (Dare et al., 1990), is a protest against the rigid, dysfunctional relationships in his family, and a demand that he receive the emotional nourishment he has been denied. But, saddled with a voice no one understands, in a physical form that is detested by his family, his protest remains unheard, his demand unrecognized, even after he dies.

#### OTHER SYSTEMS VIEWS

Therapists from other theoretical standpoints would naturally see somewhat different, though perhaps similar, processes at work in Kafka's tale. A Bowenian or Nagyian therapist, for example, would be likely to point to Gregor's role as the scapegoat in the family projection process (Bowen, 1985), by which all of the family's emotional burdens – the parental "debts" that Gregor has taken on – are laid at his door. He is a "bug" in this sense, because he reminds the family members of their own darker sides that they have attempted to dissociate themselves from by projecting onto him. In his own eyes, however, he feels himself something of a messiah for having taken on the family's "sins."

We might be struck also by the way in which Gregor has accepted a life story for himself that in no way reflects the totality of his

experience. As White and Epston (1990) might see it, Gregor's experience "is problematic to him because he is being situated in stories that others have about him and his relationships" – his family's story of him as the "cause" of their troubles, his chief's story of him as a "malingerer" – rather than in narratives he has created for himself. These stories "... allow insufficient space for the performance of [Gregor's] preferred stories" (p. 14) of which Kafka only hints – Gregor's dream of himself as Grete's protector, or his fantasies of a chamber maid he remembers from his travels, or his still-born pursuit of a milliner's cashier.

His family's or his boss's stories, as White and Epston would be able to note, "are very significantly contradicted by important aspects of [Gregor's] lived experience" (p. 14). The family narrative Gregor has internalized about his father as "helpless," for example, is directly contradicted by his father's ability to manage Gregor's life. As Jofen (1978) observes, on an unconscious level, Gregor's father is the most powerful person in the world, before whom he sees himself as an insect. Yet Gregor goes along with the story of his father's incapacity, even after he confronts repeated evidence that it is false. Thus he has placed himself in a tale in which he cannot possibly survive, and whose ending can only be tragedy.

## SUMMARY

"Disturbed behavior," writes Andolfi (1979), "is a signal that needs for autonomy and differentiation have been sacrificed to maintain dysfunctional family relationships" (p. 11). In this sense, Gregor's metamorphosis – the "disturbed behavior" of the novella – symbolizes his sacrifice of himself to the emotional need of his parents and sister that he bear their problems for them.

Sadly, it is a sacrifice that will bring only a token salvation to his survivors. For though it is easy to read the novella's final lines as a rebirth of the family and the emergence of new life out of Gregor's death, as does Gray (1988), it is hard, from a systems point of view, to see it in such a hopeful light. For looking at their daughter, and noticing her emerging beauty, Mr. and Mrs. Samsa are once more unable simply to *accept* it and value it in itself, but again decide that they must intervene in some way.

"They grew quieter," writes Kafka (1915/1968), "and half unconsciously exchanged glances of complete agreement, having come to the conclusion that it would soon be time to find a good husband for her" (p. 127). They thus enmesh themselves again in the life of their child.

It is arguable, of course, that their thoughts are entirely



appropriate for turn of the century Europe, and are not the beginnings of an attempt to find in Grete a new savior to make up for the pain they feel their dead son caused them. Yet, the subtle irony of the tale's last line is difficult to avoid. For when Grete "springs to her feet" and "stretches her young body," the parents again view it not as an independent action on Grete's part, but "like a confirmation of their new dreams and excellent intentions" (p. 127). Grete's purposes, like her late brother's, will remain forever theirs.

## AUTONOMY AND INTIMACY IN ROBINSON JEFFERS'

### "THE PURSE-SEINE," AND OTHER POEMS

Thus far, we have explored systemic concepts in two fictive works that tell the tales of troubled families, uncovering, in *Six Characters*, a family whose members shared radically different visions of reality, and, in *The Metamorphosis*, extreme enmeshment between a family system, the larger society, and the family members themselves. The poetry of Robinson Jeffers, however, offers us little in the way of any family to examine, and forces us to probe for systems issues somewhat differently.

"It is a basic assumption of [Bowen] systems theory," writes Thomas Fogarty (no date, a), "that all people want *closeness*," or intimacy.

... Two people move toward each other, not realizing that closeness must be worked at, and that it is an inconstant state, here and then gone. Such intensity often leads to *fusion* followed by *distance*. One moves toward, and the other distances.

There are few alternatives. If one is to avoid the

nothingness of self, he must pursue to fill self from others. Otherwise he feels that he would die inside. If one is to protect his space from the intrusion of others, he must distance and live with his loneliness. (p. 45, original italics)

Kerr and Bowen (1988) have described this struggle between autonomy and intimacy as our attempt to balance the forces of individuation and togetherness in our lives, while writers like Storr (1988) speak of our need for solitude versus our hunger for personal relationships. And, as therapists, we are accustomed to seeing such patterns in the families and couples who seek our help. It is a struggle, however, that a careful reading suggests we can also find in Jeffers' verse, examples of which we will investigate here, in which the avoidance and even negation of others, in the search for an idealized autonomy and what ultimately amounts to a superhuman intimacy, are among the strongest messages.

#### AUTONOMY AND INTIMACY IN "THE PURSE-SEINE"

In his poem, "The Purse-Seine," for example, Jeffers (1988) equates closeness with others with being trapped in a huge net while the indifferent universe silently observes the slow process of destruction. To be with others, in this work, in a state of intimacy, is to court "mass

disaster," while to be without them totally in an idealized autonomy is to live in an otherwise dark, forbidding world.

The piece opens with a description of sardine fishermen on the California coast, plying their trade by night, searching for the schooling creatures by which they make their livelihood.

They work northward from Monterey, coasting Santa Cruz;  
 off New Year's Point or Pigeon Point /The look-out man  
 will see some lakes of milk-colored light on the sea's night-  
 purple; he points, and the helmsman /Turns the dark prow,  
 the motor-boat circles the gleaming shoal and drifts out  
 her seine-net. They close the circle /And purse the  
 bottom of the net, then with great labor haul it in.

"I cannot tell you," he continues, "/How beautiful the scene is, and a little terrible...." The fish, knowing they are caught, "wildly beat from one wall to the other of their closing destiny" while "the vast walls of night /Stand erect to the stars" (p. 517).

It is a scene of haunting and gloomy images. The ghostly men in the moonless night peering into the depths, the black-prowed ship – a ship of death – turning to follow the glowing, harried, schooling fish, "each beautiful slender body sheeted with flame" (p. 517), the closing tendrils of the net, the mute and icy cosmos. Yet, for the unidentified

persona of the poem, it is still a scene of inexpressible beauty, whose tragedy – the deaths of the ensnared fish – is only "a little terrible."

After the description of the capture, the speaker's focus changes to what would seem a different point entirely: "Lately I was looking from a night mountain-top /On a wide city, the colored splendor, galaxies of light." But the speaker soon is wondering aloud,

how could I help but recall the seine-net /Gathering the  
luminous fish? I cannot tell you how beautiful the city  
appeared, and a little terrible. /I thought, We have  
gathered the machines and locked all together into  
interdependence; we have built the great cities; now  
/There is no escape. We have gathered vast populations  
incapable of free survival, insulated /From the strong  
earth, each person in himself helpless, on all dependent.  
The circle is closed, and the net is being hauled in. (pp.  
517-518)

The wide city, filled with "colored splendor," is, for Jeffers' speaker, the seine-net, while the people in its borders, "locked all together," are the fish. The people "hardly feel the cords drawing, yet," like the schooling sardines, "they shine already" (p. 518), radiant as they approach their deaths.

What follows for humanity from this interdependence on ourselves, the speaker goes on, will be "inevitable mass disasters," not "in our time nor in our children's, but we and our children /Must watch the net draw narrower." Our intimacy and closeness with each other, in other words, have robbed us of "free survival," and will be the cause of our doom. "These things," the speaker adds, sardonically, "are Progress" (p. 518). The only solution is isolation.

#### AUTONOMY AND INTIMACY IN TWO OTHER PIECES

Similar visions confront us in many of Jeffers' (1988) other poems, such as "Shine, Perishing Republic," and "Hurt Hawks." We see again, for example, the idea of human connection as dangerous.

"But for my children," he writes in "Shine, Perishing Republic," a work in which he contemplates, with apparently only mild regret, the eventual end of the nation, "I would have them keep their distance from the thickening center." "And boys," he goes on, "be in nothing so moderate as in love of man" (p. 15). The desire for connection with others, he states, "is the trap that catches noblest spirits, that caught – they say – God, when he walked on earth" (p. 15).

In "Hurt Hawks," he likewise rails against "you communal people," and extols the savage and solitary, over the social and tame. In this

piece, in which describes Jeffers' caring for and later killing a hawk he had come upon with a broken wing, death - "the lead gift" – is preferable to a life of vulnerable dependence connected to man (p. 377-378).

#### DISCUSSION

I am not the first commentator, of course, to make these basic observations about Jeffers' work. Brophy (1973) has observed that "Nothing is further from the intent of Jeffers' art than empathy" (p. 151) and noted that Jeffers' harshest critics accused him of "having, for all intents, no use for humanity" (285). Yet, in my own eyes, Jeffers' images are not really about "the gospel of human annihilation" (Gilbert, 1965, p. 147) he has been sometimes accused of preaching. Rather, they are classic examples of the art of distancing.

#### *Distancing*

The distancer, writes Fogarty (no date, a), again building on Bowen's (1985) concept of pursuing and distancing, like the persona in "The Purse-Seine," "sees sadness and beauty from afar; criticism and pimples from close by. From distance, everything is soft and graceful," as in the poem the netted fish and netted people shine in their splendor. "But into that empty space," as into the mind of the speaker in the

poem, "comes his pervading sense of death" (p. 46), Jeffers' "inevitable mass-disasters."

Both the men on the trawler netting the sardines and the speaker in the verse look down on their subjects from on high, where not only are they too far away to see the faults of others, and where death looks only "a little terrible," but where they are too far away for others to detect their own blemishes. It seems no accident as well that Jeffers has chosen the image of sardines for humanity. For if the great fear of the distancer is to be swallowed up by or fused with others, then it is to the distancer's advantage to see those surrounding her or him from a perspective in which they are as small as possible.

Moreover, the speaker in this verse – Jeffers, to all intents and purposes – like all distancers, repeatedly confuses *isolation* with *autonomy*, *distance* with *differentiation*. As a poet, Jeffers is clearly *remote* from his subjects, but he is not actually *different* from them. No one who writes for the community of readers, as Jeffers clearly did and knew he did, can claim to be a "*non-communal*" person, as he implicitly claims in "Hurt Hawks." Says Storr (1988) in *Solitude*, speaking of artists in general, and the myth of the artist's "ivory tower" of isolation, "They [artists] forget that art is communication, and that, implicitly or explicitly, the work that they produce in solitude is aimed



at somebody" (p.147).

Jeffers (1988) carries the torch of "rugged individualism" ("I'd sooner, except [sic] the penalties, kill a man than a hawk" ["Hurt Hawks," p. 377]) against his perception of the gloom of social homogeneity. But Kerr and Bowen (1988) would note, "Both 'rugged individualism' and obligatory conformity are strongly influenced by the *togetherness* [intimacy] force. The 'rugged individualist,'" like the persona Jeffers takes on in his verse,

operates as much in reaction to others as the compliant person. He has trouble being an "individual" *without permanently disrupting his relationships with others.*

The compliant person has difficulty maintaining his relationships with others *without giving up his "individuality."* Rugged individualism and compliance, therefore, are two sides of the same coin. (p. 64, original italics)

Jeffers' poetic stance, in other words, is less a position he has chosen freely on his own than one he has established *in reaction* to the larger world for fear that he will become smothered by it – another meaning of the image of *mass*, or overwhelming, disasters. In this stance, he is not different from people in communities, simply overcome by them.

Jeffers thus in his verse has a very clear use for humanity at large. Without the "others" to fight being connected with, he would have no sense of connection to anything at all.

Real differentiation, that is, true autonomy, as opposed to the *isolation* expressed in "The Purse-Seine," and elsewhere, in fact requires, Bowenians and others would argue, not separation from others, but frequent, if brief, contact (Bowen, 1985; Hall, 1981), so that one learns how to govern oneself independently of the emotional surroundings one finds oneself in.

### *The Pursuing Distancer*

"Over time," writes Fogarty (no date, a), "it becomes clear that inside of every distancer is a pursuer, and inside every pursuer is a distancer" (p. 47). While distancing himself from the more human world, Jeffers pursues an ideal form of intimacy, a connection with the savage and primitive spirit, the non-human, the perfectly autonomous, the indifferent mountains, the "vast walls of night," and "the wild God of the world." His deity, in fact, like his poetic persona, is "trapped," by love of man, a trap Jeffers' persona presumably must set also if he is to ever connect with this figure.

It is of course a safe connection for him to chase, since, being an

ideal, it will always be unattainable. Again, he will not have to risk getting close to it and being disappointed by its blemishes, or having his own shortcomings show.

One has the sense here too that Jeffers' persona, like an Old Testament prophet, also pursues the people against whose togetherness he rails, waiting for them to heed his warning and see the error of their ways. It seems likely that, unconsciously, the speaker hopes the people around him will simply take away his deep sense of aloneness by duplicating it within themselves. Misery, in the end, loves misery.

"Everybody searches," says Fogarty (no date, b), "for that comfortable spot without too much fusion or distance," (p. 44), the perfect blend of intimacy and autonomy. In the case of Jeffers' verse, however, it is not a place inhabited by women and men.

### *Further Reflections*

Much of what passes for images of autonomy in Jeffers' poems seems not only distant, but gender-typically stereotyped. As Wynne and Wynne (1986) might note, it is the early 20th century male norm of the strong, silent observer, who thinks about the tragedy around him but does not cry, who does not let his emotions overtake him, who does not

allow himself to lose "control," who would sooner shoot a wounded animal (as he describes doing in "Hurt Hawks") than try to heal it and have it live on in what he feels would be diminished – and dependent – capacity.

Re-reading his verse, I could not help but think of Sheinberg and Penn's (1991) recent discussion of the concept of "dynamic" autonomy, an autonomy in which one does not, like Jeffers' poetic persona, avoid dependence at any cost, but is fully free to embrace it, to recognize the social nature of one's own humanity, to experience empathy without feeling enmeshed or swallowed up, to move close without experiencing the paralyzing fear that one may soon be abandoned.

It is hard to imagine that, at least in his poetry, Jeffers did not experience such fears. We do not protect what we do not perceive as threatened, and it would be difficult to find a more protective stance than Jeffers takes in "The Purse-Seine," and in many of his other pieces.

#### SUMMARY

My purpose here is not pathography, but to examine the clinical ideas present in Jeffers' work. Thus it is important not to confuse Jeffers' use of distancing in his poetry with the question of Jeffers as a distancer in everyday life. While he may have been, we have no

evidence for this, and Axberger (1973) in fact states that

By the unanimous testimony of those who knew him well, he seemed a well-balanced, perhaps slightly reserved man. His marriage was unusually happy, his relationship with his two sons, harmonic [sic].... Visitors to the house testify to the atmosphere of joy, humor, and friendliness. (p. 252)

One can be a distancer, Fogarty (no date, a) observes, in one area of life, such as one's creative world, and not distance, or even be a pursuer, in another.

What is clear is that Jeffers' poetry is filled with images of distancing, and that as such it gives us insight into an important part of systems thinking. We see in it the idealized confusion of isolation with autonomy, and the sense of intimacy not as a comfort, but as an all embracing, killing web.

## THE *LAOCOON*: SYSTEMIC CONCEPTS IN A WORK OF ART<sup>1</sup>

...and the figure of the priest and his sons in the coils of the snake  
appeared to him to have the deepest meaning.

John Cheever

Our discussion to this point has been limited to examples of drama, fiction, and poetry, in which we have faced questions regarding our perceptions of reality, the structures of families and larger systems, and the relational elements connecting and separating us from one another, among other concerns. Similar issues will emerge, along with others, in the present chapter, though in somewhat different forms. Here, however, our focus changes from a creation of the pen to a work of sculpture, the group of the *Laocoon* (Figure 1), housed in the Belvedere courtyard of the Vatican Museums.

Unlike literary documents, objects of fine art have rarely been explored by therapists of any sort, and hardly ever, if at all, by family therapists. Yet, since my first encounter with systemic thought, one of my deepest beliefs has been that family therapy explains large aspects of this work, while it in turn sheds light on many facets of our field.

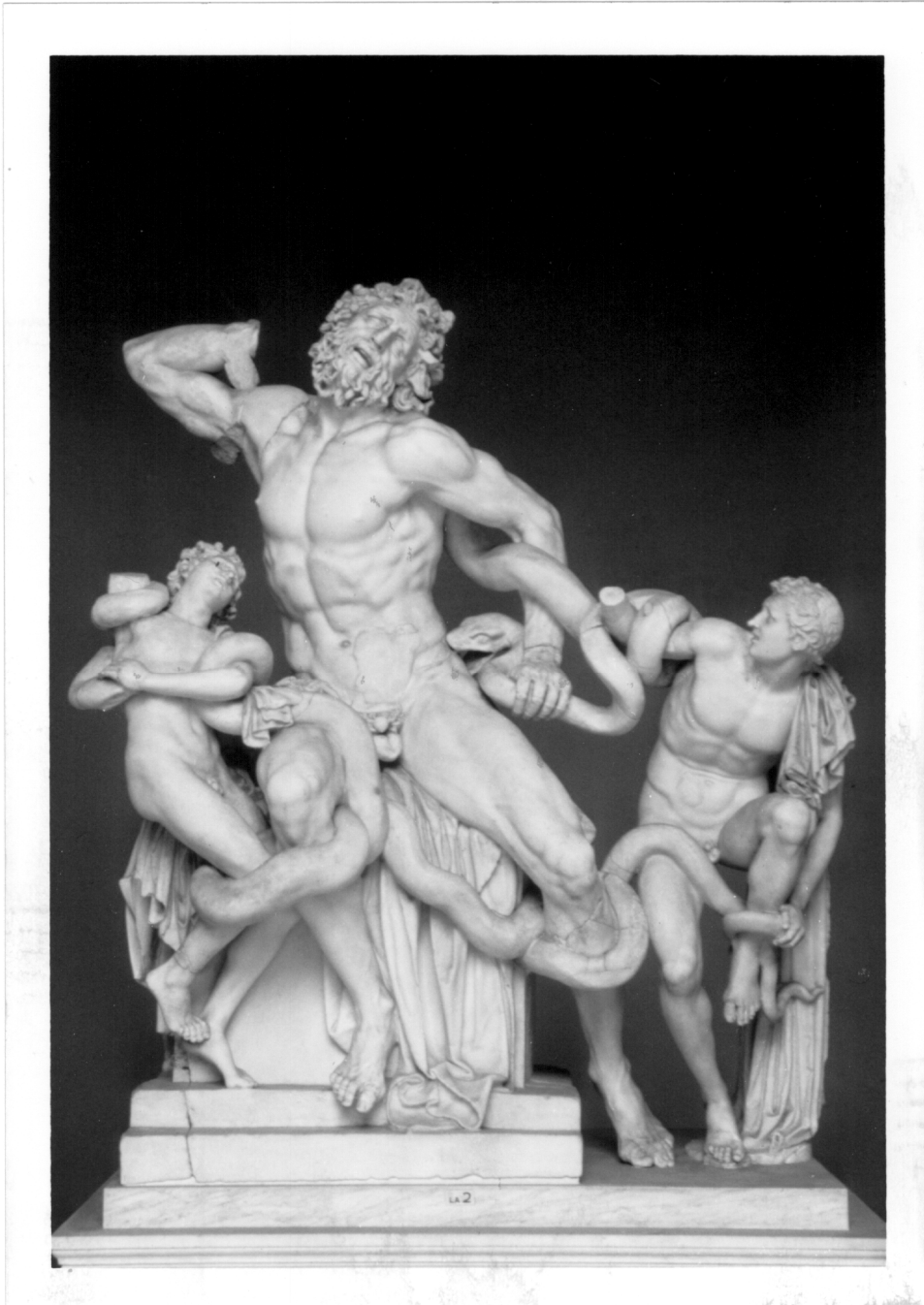


Figure 1. The *Laocöon*. Photograph by the author.

## THE LAOCOON

*Historic and Mythic Basis of the Statue*

The *Laocoon*, writes Bieber (1967), "is probably the most widely discussed work of sculpture which we possess from antiquity" (p. 11), a fact not hard to grasp for anyone who has seen this marble image of the Trojan priest, Laocoon, and his sons, caught in the twisting coils of two monstrous snakes, wrestling to be free. "This monument," wrote Goethe (1798/1980), "exhausts its subject, and ... happily executes all the conditions of art" (p. 86), while his predecessor, Winckelmann (1764/1968), declared that "The wise man finds it an inexhaustible subject of inquiry" (p. 230).

Over the years, scholars have dated the work as early as 170 B.C. (Richter, 1970), but more recent opinion – with the vigorous exception of Rice (1986) – favors a Tiberian date, around 25 A.D (Andreae, 1988; Blanckenhagen, 1973; J.J. Pollitt, personal communication, 21 April 1989; Stewart, 1977). It is first mentioned by Pliny (1962) in his *Natural History*, during the reign of Titus in 79 A.D. (Bieber, 1967; Lawrence, 1972), as a work "superior to any painting and any bronze. Laocoon, his children and the wonderful clasping coils of the snakes were carved from a single block<sup>2</sup> in accordance with an agreed plan by those eminent craftsmen, Hagesander, Polydorus and Athenodorus, all



of Rhodes" (Pliny, 1962, pp. 29-31).

Of the artists mentioned by Pliny, little is clearly known. At least two of them, Hagesandros [Hagesander] and Athanodorus [Athenodorus], have often been regarded, like the figures they created, as father and son (Lawrence, 1972; Lessing, 1766/1877; Mitchell, 1883; J.J. Pollitt, personal communication, 21 April 1989; Stewart, 1977; Winckelmann, 1764/1968). Recently discovered sculptures at Sperlonga, Italy, showing their names ordered differently from Pliny's text (Rice, 1986; Blanckenhagen, 1973, 1976), however, have caused several scholars to challenge this idea (Bieber, 1967; Rice, 1986, Richter, 1970). Without new evidence to clarify this question, the truth may be impossible to know (P. von Blanckenhagen, personal communication, 1 May 1989).

For a time after Pliny, the statue was lost, and only was rediscovered in 1506 in the Domus Aurea on the Oppian Hill (Andrae, 1973). It has suffered varying degrees of damage over the years, and has been restored many times, most recently by Filippo Magi around 1960 (Bieber, 1967)<sup>3</sup>.

The work depicts an episode from the story of the fall of Troy: the destruction of the Trojan priest Laocoon, and his sons, shortly after the Trojans had discovered the wooden horse. Scholars have debated

for centuries whose version of the myth was the sculptors' source (Andreae, 1988; Lessing, 1766/1877; Mitchell, 1883; Stewart, 1977). Given the uncertainties of its date and the fluid nature of artistic creation, however, their arguments are largely speculative.

The best known version of the story is from Virgil's (1956) 1st century B.C. *Aeneid*, in which Aeneas recounts the controversy over taking the horse into the city to Dido, queen of Carthage. Laocoon, a priest of Neptune, had argued vehemently against allowing the horse inside, warning of "Greek gifts," and even throwing a spear against it, an act some viewed as impiety.

Then, Aeneas relates, as Laocoon left the debate to perform a sacrifice,

two giant arching sea-snakes swam over the calm waters from Tenedos.... We paled at the sight and scattered; they forged on, straight at Laocoon. First each seized his two little sons, twined round him, and bit, and devoured the tiny limbs. Next they seized Laocoon ... they bound him in the giant spirals of their scaly length.... His hands strove frantically to wrench the knots apart. Filth and black venom drenched his priestly bands. His shrieks were horrible, and filled the sky. (pp. 57-58)

Convinced that Laocoon has been punished for offending the gods, the Trojans fatefully take the edifice inside, unaware his warnings will prove all too correct, or that, as told in versions of the myth different from Virgil's, he has suffered not for desecrating the horse, but for breaking a vow of celibacy to Apollo, for whom he also was a priest, by marrying and fathering two sons (Graves, 1960).

#### PREVIOUS COMMENTARIES

Earlier studies of the *Laocoon* have viewed it from a variety of perspectives. The most famous, for example, Lessing's (1766/1877) *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, holds that the differences between the group and Virgil's story define the boundaries between the fine and the literary arts. Virgil's Laocoon "shrieks horribly," while the Laocoon of Hagesandros, Polydorus, and Athanodorus only appears to moan, because the greater realism of sculpture, in Lessing's view, forces the sculptor to be more restrained than the poet, who deals with mental, rather than physical, images.

Most commentators, though, have considered the statue without reference to other art forms. Some have concentrated on the figure of the father, mentioning the sons or the serpents mainly in passing, while others have given more attention to the piece as a whole, or to the

interplay of its components.

Winckelmann (1764/1972), for instance, saw the sculpture as "a great man who ... strives to suppress all audible manifestation of pain" (p. 125), and was less impressed by its other elements. Kenneth Clark (1956), almost two hundred years later, went so far as to call the sons and serpents "accessory" (p. 230) to the figure of Laocoon. "Pliny's contention," Clark writes,

that the marble is the work of three craftsmen is borne out by the fact that it exhibits three different degrees of skill. It would be hard to believe that the admirable carver of the father's torso should also have executed the lifeless surfaces of the elder son's body. (p.401)

Other scholars have viewed the work in somewhat different terms.

Furtwangler and Ulrichs (1911/1977), comparing the sizes of all three figures of the group, state that "The smallness of the boys" relative to their father "is probably intentional" (pp. 161-162), acknowledging the sons' importance to the work. Their small stature, in this view, beyond merely emphasizing their father's prominence, underscores their own vulnerability and dependence. Mitchell (1883) especially notes the extreme helplessness of the younger son, who she feels "would fall from his father's side" (p. 604) were it not for the encircling coils of the lower

serpent.

Many scholars, moreover, have suggested through the years that the elder son is less entangled by the serpents than his brother or his father, and may escape their tragedy (Bieber, 1967; Furtwangler & Ulrichs, 1911/1977; Gardner, 1924; Goethe, 1798/1980; Mitchell, 1883; Stewart, 1977). Goethe (1798/1980) in particular writes that, although the figure of the younger son "is so enfolded that it can no longer defend itself," while that of the father, "although yet in a condition to defend itself, is nevertheless wounded," the elder son's figure "has, lastly, some hope of saving itself" (p. 84).

"The elder son," he says,  
 is only slightly inlaced [sic]; he does not yet feel himself  
 oppressed or inflicted with pain; he is afraid at the wound  
 and momentaneous [sic] movement of his father, he utters  
 a cry, endeavors to extricate his foot from the serpent  
 which has inlaced it; he is therefore an observer, a witness  
 who takes a part in the action... (p. 84)

### *Negative Judgments*

Though the sculpture has usually been highly praised, not all commentators have viewed it favorably. Lawrence (1929) lamented "the

deplorable lack of taste which permitted the construction of such a group" (p. 324), while Gardner (1924) flatly condemns it as "a mere pathological study of agony and contortion" (p. 509). He reserves special antipathy for the snakes, arguing that they

have no truth to nature, but are zoological monstrosities.

They clearly are not of the poisonous order, but kill their victims by crushing them in their irresistible coils; yet for such a process they have not the girth or muscular development ... and one of them is biting like a dog. (pp. 509-510)

We may argue, of course, that the sculptors of the *Laocoon* intended to create "zoological monsters," after the "sea-serpents" (Graves, 1960, p. 333) of the mythical story. In any case, Gardner's contention that the serpents are "clearly not of the poisonous order," seems largely an objection that they lack verisimilitude, rather than venom. For careful observation of the work itself clearly shows the fangs of the lower snake, presumably poisonous, piercing the side of the younger son's torso, while the fangs of the upper serpent sink deep into the hip of the father.

#### A SYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVE

As I have noted earlier, no clearly established method yet exists

in family therapy for examining a work of art. We obviously can use the principles of family sculpting (Papp, Silverstein, & Carter, 1973), in which "Vague impressions and confused feelings on the periphery of awareness are given form through physical spatial expression" (p. 202), however, as a basis to explore the statue.

Systemically, for example, we are far less inclined than either Winckelmann (1764/1972) or Clark (1956) to see the father as the central figure of the work, since, from a systems stance, the group is less the portrait of a great man striving to suppress his suffering, surrounded by mere "accessories," than the marble illustration of a triadic, familial relationship, frozen, in Goethe's (1798/1980) words, "like a flash of lightning fixed" (p. 81), at a moment of crisis. Nor are we able to regard the serpents, as Gardner (1924) does, as lacking "truth to nature." For in the same way that the psychoanalytic critic must be concerned not with the outer, but the *intra-psychic* meaning of the work she would explain, so, after the general meaning of *systems* mentioned earlier that is offered by Cottone (1989), the systemic therapist must focus on the *relational*, rather than the *physical*, reality the artist offers her.

Seen in this light, the serpents Gardner dismisses so harshly arguably serve important functions. Most obviously, they literally bind together the human members of the sculpture in a "living cord" (Goethe,

1798/1980, p. 81), "prevent[ing]," as Lessing (1766/1877) noted, "movement or action" (p. 46). They have bound the younger son so closely to the father, as Mitchell (1883) has said, that the son is virtually lifted off his feet, unable to stand alone, and similarly threaten to bind his brother. Simultaneously, under the weight of their coils, Laocoon himself, with his younger boy, has fallen back upon the altar over which he should preside, as though ironically self-sacrificed. His own and his younger son's priestly mantles have slipped from their shoulders, while the elder son's robe dangles precariously by his side.

The serpents also suggest a literally poisoned relationship, in addition to one of constricting bonds. The younger son in particular, into whose side the fangs of the lower serpent have penetrated, seems, as Goethe (1798/1980) has stated, beyond all hope, and his smitten father appears only moments from succumbing, while the elder son, farther from the sacrificial altar, somewhat less entangled, and as yet unbitten, remains nonetheless in serious peril.

### *The Absence of the Mother*

We would note as well from a relational stance an obvious anomaly: the omission of a mother. The lack of a mother of any kind, or any hint of her existence, is clearly one of the enigmas of the statue,



as well as of the myth itself.

By the majority of mythographers, the wife of Laocoon is simply ignored. Only the 4th century A.D.'s Quintus of Smyrna (1968) mentions her, and he obviously could not have influenced the much earlier Rhodian artists.

We may wonder, with only partial certainty, if the sexism of earlier times simply saw her as dispensable, or if there is some other cause, or combination of causes, for her absence. We must acknowledge, however, that final answers, like the motives of the sculptors, are beyond us, and any reasons we suggest would be purely speculative.

### *Motherlessness*

Her omission, however, still is haunting, if outside explanation, and holds consequences for our understanding of the work. It is difficult not to ask, for example, if her absence is in some way connected with the crisis depicted in the group. We would expect any family missing a member to show signs of strain, and strain and tension in the statue seem ready to burst the stone.

George and Wilding (1972) point out in their seminal study of motherless families that "the absence of a mother ... is likely ... to make

the family less able to meet the emotional needs of its members" (p. 181) and distort its normal structure. "It is not only the children," they write, "who have to rely on the father to a greater extent than they did before but the father, too, is more likely to discuss some of his problems and feelings with the children" (p. 74), a tendency that "may prove damaging" (p. 75) if the father relies too heavily upon them to carry the emotional burdens formerly shared by his spouse.

The children, as George and Wilding (1972) go on to suggest, have thus lost not only their mother, but a part of their father also, for he now may relate to them more as a peer than as his offspring. In turn, he has lost a part of his children, as well as his wife, for he may ask them, and they may try to be, consciously or otherwise, more "adult" than they previously might.

Whitaker would tell us too that the role of the first child in a family is to be the mother to the mother, and the role of the second is to be the mother to the father, while the third child, if present, becomes the father's playmate (C. Whitaker, personal communication, 14 June 1989). With the mother missing from the scene, we might therefore anticipate many of the specific interactions the statue displays, expecting that the first child of Laocoon would be less entangled in the system, as he seems to be, since the parent he would otherwise parent is not

present, or that the second child would be more tightly bound to his father's side, as he appears, in partial compensation for the missing wife. Finally, as parent and as children, all three are either encumbered or injured, suggesting, along George and Wilding's (1972) lines, their loss to each other as a whole and complete father, and as whole and complete sons.

STRUCTURAL, TRANSGENERATIONAL, STRATEGIC  
& MILANIAN CONCEPTS

Beyond these general observations, we can examine the *Laocoon* in detail using concepts of several family therapy models.

*Relational Forces in the Statue from a Structural Point of View*

From a structural (Minuchin, 1974; Minuchin et al., 1967) point of view, for example, the group visually evokes triangulation and enmeshment. The sculpture itself is roughly pyramidal or triangular in outline, and Laocoon and his sons, yoked together by the serpents, appear strikingly similar to Haley's (1980) structuralist metaphor of a triangle as "three planets ... held together in orbit by unseen bonds" (p.81) – bonds here, however, that are brutally visible.

It also hauntingly suggests a description of enmeshment by

McArthur (1988) that I discovered several months after beginning this study. Discussing the phenomenon of nightmares about snakes commonly experienced by children growing up in distressed families, she observes that

This has been interpreted in the past as sexual-oedipal, but it also appears to be a symbol of patients' enmeshment. Children's experience of being coopted is frequently accompanied by nightmares about snakes waiting everywhere to trip, bite, or strangle. After such dreams, children are often afraid to get up in the morning, fearing snakes under the bed. Frequently, snake dreams recur during the course of psychotherapy for an adult. (p. 14)

It is as if the statue were a sculptural realization of such a dream, formed in the workshops of the ancient Roman empire, nineteen centuries before the concepts it expresses could be recognized.

Specifically, from a structural stance, the sculpture shows a cross-generational triangle, in which normal boundaries between a parent and his children have broken down into literally constricting, poisonous over-involvement. The members of the sibling sub-system are connected to each other only through their father, to whom each is directly tied, with the younger linked more closely to the father than the

elder, as if in an alliance with the father against the elder son.

The elder son in turn leans noticeably away from the other two, as though less engaged in the system than they are, in keeping with Goethe's (1798/1980) description of him as an "observer" (p. 84) partly on the outside. The three, in this sense, are reminiscent of those families in which two members of a coalition sit visibly closer to each other in the consulting room than to the family member against whom they are allied.

*Relational Forces in the Statue from a Transgenerational Point of View*

From a transgenerational (Bowen, 1985; Kerr & Bowen, 1988) view of the *Laocoon*, the father and his sons also appear to represent a triangle. The younger boy, most involved and therefore most impaired, as Bowen (1985) would note, is again more closely allied with the father, and the elder is again on the outside. This would be the preferred position, as Bowen says, "when a triangle is in a state of tension" (p. 478), as these figures clearly are. Rather than depicting enmeshment, however, the serpents, transgenerationally, imply the Bowenian forces of emotional fusion, while the swirling whirl of the sculpture as a whole, including the blending of the younger son's left leg into the right leg of

the father, suggests a marble illustration of the undifferentiated ego mass.

Moreover, "Any member of a relatively fixed triangle perceives himself as 'caught'" (Bowen, 1985, p.488). Thus the struggles of the trio to free themselves from the serpents' coils are partially analogous to the normal struggle of members of a family to differentiate themselves from one another, and free themselves from the forces of emotional fusion.

And yet, as Bowen (1985) states, when there is a basic lack of differentiation in families, as the tightness of the serpents' coils in the statue implies, "each small step toward the differentiation of self" by any member of a family "is opposed by emotional forces for 'togetherness,' which keeps the emotional system in check" (p. 494). Stierlin (1974), using a term that clearly would describe the sculpture, even speaks of "bound families," in which, when children or adults attempt to break away, they are "pulled back quickly, as if held on an invisible rubber leash" (p. 12). It is a concept similar to Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark's (1984) notion of invisible loyalties, where they likewise note the tendency of families to oppose a member's separation.

The motion of the elder son toward the viewer's right, for example, away from his father and his brother, is visibly counterpoised by the weight of Laocoon and the younger son, both of whom lean

toward the viewer's left, as though struggling to restrain him by the "leashes" of the snakes. He moves away symbolically, as well, from the sacrificial altar on which, wounded, his father and brother have fallen. This altar, we might argue, is the stone on which family individuation is sacrificed, and on which the "ledger" of family obligations, in Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark's (1984) terms, is balanced. The father and younger son, in this sense, have "given up" themselves on this stone, ostensibly for the sake of "family togetherness."

Stierlin (1974) points out how such a pattern, which he calls the "mode of binding," becomes intergenerational and reciprocal:

When this mode dominates, the family is gripped by centripetal forces. Parents and children operate under the unspoken assumption that essential satisfactions and securities can be obtained only within the family, while the outside world looks hostile and forbidding. This assumption then resonates in the attitudes of parents who ... see only one avenue open to them: to tie their children ever more closely to themselves and to the "family ghetto" and to delay or prevent the children's separation at all cost. (p. 36)

In this sense, it is entirely appropriate that the bonds between Laocoon

and his sons are constricting and venomous. Moreover, the idea of some critics that the elder son "will easily strip the coil of the snake from his left leg" and reach safety (Bieber, 1967, p. 39) bears a strong resemblance to the concept of emotional cut-off (Bowen, 1985; Kerr & Bowen, 1988), since it implies that ties of family loyalty and fusion really can be broken conclusively.

To believe in the hope of a real "escape" by the elder son, however, we must ignore the fact, as many critics seem to do, that even after he "easily strip[s]" the coil from his leg he will still be held tightly in a double coil around his upper arm. Mere distance, writes Bowen (1985), "do[es] not fool an emotional system" (p. 491). One never ultimately "escapes" one's family, no matter how far one runs (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1984; Bowen, 1985; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Stierlin, 1974). Another "coil" is always holding us, whether we, or others, realize it or not.

Transgenerationally, it is this dilemma that imbues the elder son's position with such pathos and tension. Seeking to flee, he is restrained, both by the visible forces of the serpents, and by the invisible bonds of intergenerational family loyalty that the serpents represent.



*Relational Forces in the Statue from Strategic & Milanian  
Points of View*

Were we to view the sculpture strategically (Fisch, et al., 1982), we would be likely to argue that, with its multiple loops and coils yoking the members immovably together, it exquisitely embodies the relational double-bind. All three figures are literally doubly and triply bound together, the father by both legs, the elder son by his left leg and right arm, and the younger son by both legs and both arms.

The elder son, presumably with the best chance for escape, does not look outward from the center toward some external hope, but back toward his father, where there is only destruction. The younger son, closest to Laocoon, with whom he should be safe, is instead, as we imagined the Bowenians would note, the most impaired, again suggesting paradoxical conflict.

And the father, wounded himself, is confronted with the classic dilemma of keeping his children close and watching them die, or letting them go and risking their loss to him forever. The paradoxical nature of their relationship keeps all three in check, and their struggles to change, as Fisch, Weakland, and Segal (1982) might observe, only heighten their mutual dilemma.

In this sense, the statue also calls to mind Boscolo, Cecchin,

Hoffman, and Penn's (1987) Milanian formulation of the pseudostable and the pseudofugitive child. In their conception, the authors describe a family in which

The idea that people might leave is unthinkable....  
 ...usually in a family like this there is a pseudofugitive and a pseudostable [child]. The pseudostable child stays home, thinking 'This is the way I get love from my parents.'  
 The pseudofugitive one discovers that by moving out, threatening to leave, she has a tremendous effect....(p. 203)

In the *Laocoon*, it is the younger son who most embodies the pseudostable child. Remaining close to his father, in contrast to his brother, he appears the reliable, loyal one. But it is only a pseudostability, for he is also the most wounded, and closest to death. He cannot be relied upon for anything other than remaining a child – and thus always developmentally impaired.

Similarly, the elder boy appears ready to flee at any moment, not merely away from the constrictions of the family, but, in contrast to his brother, toward the approaching adulthood that his greater physical maturation, as carved by the sculptors, represents. He has only to push down with his left hand and his legs will be free. Yet, as we noted earlier, he is still bound tightly by his other arm. And his attention is

still centered back toward his family, rather than away from it, as if his intention to fly is only tentative.

He will never actually run away, no matter how imminent his apparent departure. He threatens to run, in this sense, primarily for attention, an attention he cannot have if he really goes.

The family of Laocoon remains immobilized, as Boscolo et al. (1987) might put it, "through an alternation of doubt: 'If I leave, will the one who stays be preferred? If I stay, will the one who leaves be preferred?' This oscillation continues, keeping everybody involved" (p. 205). The serpents holding them symbolize the paradoxical nature of their ties to one another. Though the serpents keep them connected, they are crushing and poisonous, and threaten to destroy the family entirely.

The solution to this problem, according to Boscolo et al. (1987), revolves around a basic family premise: "If you accept the idea that relationships are not permanent – that mother and child is not a permanent relationship, that husband and wife is not permanent, that people die – that's a basic premise. People in enmeshed families try to deny this issue or test it" (p. 205), a denial powerfully evoked by the Rhodian artists.

## INTERPRETIVE LIMITS

The interpretations of the sculpture I have outlined here are necessarily limited by space, and by my own theoretical understandings and biases. They do not expose the sculptors' "true" intentions, or the "real" meaning of the statue, nor, given the different schools they represent, are they entirely consistent with each other. And they neglect important questions that would spill past these pages, such as how the family system depicted in the group may reflect the systemic relationship of Hagesandros, Polydorus, and Athanodorus themselves.

*The Statue and the Myth*

They leave out too the many ways in which our reading of the myth influences the meanings we attribute to the work of art. In the context of the version of the tale in which Laocoon is doomed because he breaks his priestly vow of celibacy (Graves, 1960), for example, the statue may appear to illustrate a horrifying vision of the sins of a father being visited upon his sons. "As I study this statue (and I am often near tears when I regularly visit a copy of it at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York)," wrote one anonymous reviewer of a draft of this paper, "I see the agony of the helpless, guilt ridden father who can't save his sons." "How many men," this reviewer continues, "break their sexual

vows, bring destruction upon themselves and their children and go down in agony?"

Yet viewed in light of Virgil's story, which fails to mention any vows, and in some scholars' opinion clearly was the sculptors' source (Andreae, 1988), we may see not the guilty patriarch whose weakness sows his own and his children's destruction, but the priest of surpassing clairvoyance and righteousness, whose very prescience and steadfastness seem to cause his family's fall. He is the Abraham who has sacrificed both his children and himself to a too deep truth and certainty. How many fathers, blinded by the glare of their own rectitude and brilliance, in part as it may glisten from their offspring, have brought comparable destruction to themselves and their families?

### *The Laocoon as Mirror*

If our understanding of the statue is limited by our conceptions of the variegated myth that gave it birth, it may be limited even more by our own personal experiences, which permeate any analysis. How may we gaze into the mirror of this work without stumbling on reflections of our own families and our selves, as Framo (1982) tells of seeing his own image in the clients in his care?

How, studying the rippling torso of Laocoon, can I fail to see the

rectitude and strength of my own father, whose power was such a comfort and anxiety for me? How can I not perceive the tortuous connections of my own family in the twisting undulations of the serpents' coils, or, in the figures of the elder and the younger sons, see my older brother's ambivalent desire to break free from our father, or my own paradoxical closeness to him? How, searching the marble futilely for a maternal presence, can I not relive my hopeless quest for a more perfect mother? How can I gaze into the terror of this work and not confront my own fears and apprehensions of fatherhood? How can we ever stare into the pool of art without the risk of drowning in the mirror of our own reflections?

It is this very ability of creative works to serve as mirrors, however, that makes them worthy of our deepest attention. "All the beautiful monuments of art," wrote Goethe (1798/1980), "represent human nature" (p. 78), whether as expressed in the conceptions of family psychotherapy, or in our most personal beliefs and recollections.

#### SUMMARY

In John Cheever's (1973) classic story, "The Country Husband," Francis Weed, the central character, wedded to an emotionally absent spouse, living in a home that Cheever calls a "battleground," notices

while gazing at the letterhead of his firm a drawing of the *Laocoon*. "And the figure of the priest and his sons in the coils of the snake appeared to him to have the deepest meaning" (p. 24). It is so deep for him, no doubt, because the image represents the poisonous, binding ties of Weed's own family. Cheever thus anticipates my effort here to explain some of the meanings of the statue in the terms and thoughts of family therapy.

Gardner (1924), who dismissed the sculpture as "a mere pathological study of agony and contortion" (p. 509), ironically was dead on target. For it is a study of a supremely important form of distortion and pain: a family system in crisis.

As such, it illustrates many of the concepts of family therapy, and in turn can be elucidated by them. It is indeed, as Winckelmann (1764/1968) believed, "an inexhaustible subject of inquiry" (p. 230), containing some of the most persuasive "supplementary evidence" (Kris, 1952) for the validity of family therapy our field is likely to find.

## DISCUSSION

### GOALS

My original goal in this undertaking was to show that family therapy can be used to explore literature and art, and that literature and art embody concepts from family therapy. Given the work of Bateman, Lidz, Lipton, Sander, Vande Kemp, and Zuk, this goal is only partly original. It is more apt to say that what I have done is attempt to demonstrate the use of family therapy to explore works and art forms not addressed by previous writers.

While, on reflection, I believe I have achieved these aims, I have not attained them entirely. My discussion of Robinson Jeffers' work, for example, though reasonably successful in exploring distancing elements in some examples of his verse, and perhaps of offering a somewhat different vision of his writing than is given by traditional criticism, still falls short, for me, of being a truly comprehensive exploration of systemic ideas in a major work of poetry.

It fails, for example, to examine multiple concepts of a specific therapeutic viewpoint, and instead focuses on only one aspect of Bowenian theory, although the idea of intimacy and autonomy itself clearly crosses theoretical lines. Given the fact, however, that, to my



knowledge, no systemic studies of poetry of any kind exist, comprehensive or otherwise, it still seems an important if only partial, step.

I had hoped also to be able to demonstrate the clinical relevance of literature and art to family therapy more fully than I have. In *Six Characters*, I have been moderately successful in discussing the play itself as a metaphor for therapy. In other chapters, however, I've been unable to do this effectively.

In the chapters on Jeffers and Kafka, I've not even tried to show how the works under discussion might be viewed as metaphors for therapy, though clearly this would have been valuable. And, though I'd originally planned to explore how the *Laocoon* not only suggests family enmeshment, but evokes the dangers to therapists of becoming overly involved with a motherless family, a hazard mentioned in the work of Jones (1983), this passage was less solid than I would have liked, and, at the suggestion of colleagues, it was dropped from the text.

Finally, though pathography was not my goal, I had hoped again in my discussion of the *Laocoon* to be able to demonstrate an isomorphic relationship between the emotional system depicted in this sculpture and the triad of its creators. Because so little is known of their relationship to one another, however, my attempt to do this was, in

the words of one reader, "So speculative as to hardly be credible," and this passage was cut as well.

Nonetheless, I have still managed, in my own view, usefully to apply transgenerational, structural, strategic, Milanian, constructivist, and other ideas to the works under consideration. Further research might look at different literary and artistic works to study, particularly poetry, different theoretical stances from which to view them, or examine other artifacts as metaphors for therapy. It might also investigate the still unknown ways in which the work of art reflects the systemic life of its creator.

#### METHOD

My main methodological aim was to approach each work from a clinical perspective, and, on the whole, I believe I have accomplished this. That is, I wanted specifically to examine what each work, viewed as a kind of artistic or literary case study (Berman, 1986), showed about clinical family therapy concepts.

The other approach I might have taken, of course, as I mentioned in my exploration of "The Purse-Seine," would have been pathography – a systems study of the work of art in order to shed light on the life of the artist. Neither method is "correct," but each has a different

purpose. To the extent that I have been able to achieve my goal of showing how creative works exemplify family therapy ideas, however, it is because I have maintained a generally clinical, rather than a pathographic, focus.

Questions might still be raised, of course, about the validity of using creative works as "case studies" of psychotherapeutic theory, and the inherently speculative nature of such an enterprise. As I have pointed out elsewhere, however, (Johnson, in press, a), such questions would implicitly suppose that we could compare the relative truths of literature and art with the relative truths of more traditional research, and reach some kind of "God's eye" view of which is to be preferred.

Good scientists continually remind us, however, of the speculative nature of *all* research, and point out that, in any case, no God's eye view is available (Bronowski, 1973). Just as, from a constructivist (Maturana, 1988) standpoint, we are unable to stand outside ourselves and judge how "real" is our understanding, so we are unable to stand outside the worlds of art and science and reach a final judgement on which conception is truly accurate (Johnson, in press, a).

In many ways, as I look back on this study, I find myself believing more and more in the truth of Smith's (1984) observation that we may have moved beyond clear and simple definitions of methodology.

"There are no procedures or criteria," he writes, exclusive to or particularly appropriate for social inquiry and, accordingly, one cannot simply tell another it must be done in this way or that because to do so will insure objectivity and lead to truth.... From this ... perspective social inquiry might be best seen as "continuous with literature – as interpreting other people to us and thus enlarging and deepening our sense of community" (p. 390).

#### LARGER IMPLICATIONS

It is impossible to say with any certainty what the implications of a study of this kind are. But we can at least speculate that the application of systemic ideas to literature and art holds many possibilities.

One obvious fruitful application is in the education of therapists and the public at large. For if the experience of therapy is generally uncommon, the experience of reading or of viewing artistic creations clearly is not. The use of systems thinking to examine creative works would in this sense provide another means for therapists to study and explicate family therapy thinking (as, in essence, it has been for me), and for general readers or art lovers to encounter systemic ideas.

The use of psychoanalytic thought to examine cultural creations in the past, moreover, literally changed the way that people saw and made art, and how they wrote and read literature. D.H. Lawrence (1960), for instance, who called psychoanalysis a "public danger" (p.3), nevertheless is still regarded by critics as an extremely Freudian novelist. And Hermann Hesse, who underwent Jungian analysis and read both Jung and Freud, consciously incorporated these psychological experiences into his fiction (Ziolkowski, 1965).

It is true also that such applications changed how therapy is viewed. It is now common to see the creative process itself as a metaphor for therapy – we speak of writers using their art as therapy (see Johnson, in press, b, or Storr, 1988), or painters like Van Gogh as coping with their emotional disorders through their creations. And, as with ideas such as the Oedipus complex (Freud, 1933/1965), we take our understanding of clinical dynamics from creative works themselves.

Whether or not similar developments will occur from the application of systemic ideas to literature and art is extremely difficult to know. But the day may not be far off when we speak commonly of the systemic novel or painting, or perhaps talk in consultation about the "Lomanian" or "Samsa-esque" family.

Hall (1981), a Bowenian, has pointed out that when "family theory

is used as a means of understanding interactions in other [non-clinical] settings" (p. 274), new ideas about it and associations with it become possible. Writers like Allen (1981) and Feinstein (1987), for example, have taken systemic approaches to historical biography, while Stein (no date) has used systems thinking to explore the interactions of national cultures.

Together with these efforts, the application of family therapy to creative works helps strengthen Lipton's (1984) claim that "...family therapy is not just a new or another method [of psychotherapy], but a whole new approach to thinking about human behavior" (p. 55). It thus offers the possibility not only of helping to ease the pain of families in crisis, but of helping individuals in any number of walks of life, who may never present at any clinic or ever meet a family therapist, nonetheless to better understand themselves and their lives.

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## NOTES

### TO SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR

<sup>1</sup>A version of this chapter was published last fall in *Family Process* under the same title (Johnson, 1990).

<sup>2</sup>A few weeks after writing this passage, I realized that Carlos Sluzki, in a letter dated March 6, 1989, had suggested to me a somewhat similar idea about the nature of therapy, after seeing an earlier draft of this article. "Perhaps," he wrote,

we [therapists] are more like author-directors of what is called 'guerilla theatre,' where a set is generated in which the end-product is not pre-structured (as, ultimately, Pirandello himself is, *Deus ex machina* of Manager, Characters and all), but the result of a co-construction of actors and audience - who frequently don't even know that a theatre event is happening.

### TO THE LAOCOON

<sup>1</sup>A version of this chapter has been accepted for publication in the *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* (Johnson, in press, c).

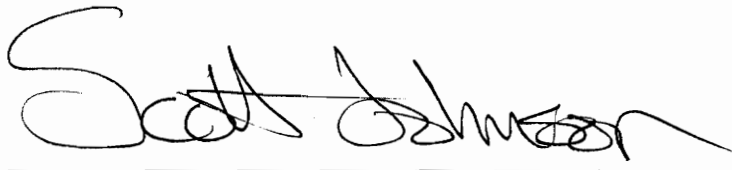
<sup>2</sup>The block has been variously described as having six to eight

joints, the seams appearing gradually over time. Michelangelo found only four in 1506 (Bieber, 1967), a testament to the skill of the sculptors.

<sup>3</sup>Many of these restorations have been the subject of controversy (Bieber, 1967; Gardner, 1924; Lawrence, 1929). Magi's plaster replica, which I was allowed to study during a visit to the Vatican in March, 1989, is generally regarded as authoritative (P. Liverani, personal communication, 13 March 1989).

## VITA

Scott Johnson grew up outside of Philadelphia, and earned degrees in English from Lincoln University, creative writing from Johns Hopkins University, and classic guitar from Peabody Conservatory, where he also served as coordinator of liberal arts. Prior to 1988, he was an associate professor of English at Suffolk Community College in Brentwood, New York, before going on leave to study family therapy. Currently, he is a Presidential Fellow at Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University in the Marriage and Family Therapy Program, and an intern in Family and Adolescent Psychology at Wood's Homes in Calgary, Alberta.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Scott Johnson", written over a horizontal line.

Scott Johnson