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OEDIPUS AGAIN: A CRITICAL STUDY OF CHARLES LAUGHTON'S *THE NIGHT OF THE HUNTER*

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In this paper the Oedipus complex is reexamined through a film, The Night of the Hunter. *Study reveals a concealed fairy tale structure, a structure that, when presented against a mythic backdrop, is ideal for presenting a certain kind of oedipal situation, that of a vulnerable damaged father and couple (indeed, couples), revealing a skewed oedipal situation. The film, produced in 1954 and looked at forty years later in the context of psychoanalytic writings of the last decade (Bergmann, Feldman, Herman, Simon), provides a matrix with which to reexamine a fundamental psychoanalytic concept, the Oedipus complex. It is the mutual enrichment of art and psychoanalysis that this paper addresses.*

> Let me tell you straightaway the great secret which has slowly been dawning on me in recent months. I no longer believe in my *neurotica*.... (T)here was the astonishing thing that in every case, not excluding my own, blame was laid on perverse acts of the father...though it was hardly credible that perverted acts against children were so general... (T)here was the definite realization that there is no "indication of reality" in the unconscious, so that it is impossible to distinguish between truth and emotionally charged fiction. (*This*

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> *leaves open the possible explanation that sexual phantasy regularly makes use of the theme of the parents* [italics added].) [Freud 1897a, pp. 215-216; 1897b, pp. 264-265]

> Only one idea of general value has occurred to me. I have found love of the mother and jealousy of the father in my own case too, and now believe it to be a general phenomenon of early childhood, *even if it does not always occur so early as in children who have been made hysterics* (italics added)…. If that is the case, the gripping power of *Oedipus Rex*, in spite of all the rational objections to the inexorable fate that the story presupposes, becomes intelligible...but the Greek myth seizes on a compulsion which everyone recognizes because he has felt traces of it in himself. Every member of the audience was once a budding Oedipus in phantasy, and this dream-fulfillment played out in reality causes everyone to recoil in horror, with the full measure of repression which separates his infantile from his present state. [Freud 1897a, pp. 223-224; 1897b, p. 272]

Freud's letters to Fliess, quoted above, written more than one hundred years ago, represent the first psychoanalytic use of literature to clarify and stabilize clinical observation, a first effort in applied psychoanalysis. These tersely stated ideas were then published in greater detail in 1900 where, speaking of the impact of *Oedipus Rex*, Freud stated, "Like Oedipus, we live in ignorance of these wishes, repugnant to morality, which have been forced upon us by Nature, and *after their revelation we may all of us well seek to close our eyes to the scenes of our childhood"* (p. 263, emphasis added). Freud's imaginative leap, and his method, has affected all of psychoanalysis ever since, from notions about fantasy to those about memory, defense (especially repression), structure, psychosexual development, the vicissitudes of instinct, and trauma and its effects. His achievement has also provided subsequent generations of psychoanalysts with a scaffolding for their own observations—observations which have led to modifications and extensions of Freud's original findings. Scrutinizing *Oedipus Rex* eventually led Freud to conclude that the Oedipus complex is the "central phenomenon of the sexual pe-

riod of early childhood" (1924, p. 173), an inference which stemmed from a study of literature (*Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet*) reverberating with clinical experience and self-analysis. Plausibility derived from redundancy.[1]

This paper will reexamine the Oedipus complex through a film, *The Night of the Hunter*. Some critics will question this approach. They will state that the psychoanalytic study of a rather obscure film can hardly be equivalent to Freud's study of *Oedipus Rex*. Of course that is true. This is not a voyage of fundamental discovery, nor are the relative artistic merits of Sophocles's play and the movie in question. Nevertheless, the very obscurity of the movie is its attraction, just as the ordinariness of the lives of our patients sheds light on the human condition. Careful study of the representation of oedipal situations in *The Night of the Hunter* enhances appreciation of the *Oedipus* trilogy and therefore clinical understandings.

THE NIGHT OF THE HUNTER

In 1955, Charles Laughton was asked to direct a movie based on a novel by Davis Grubb. Laughton asked James Agee[2] to write the script and Robert Mitchum to assume the leading role. The movie opened to mixed reviews, but also had the misfortune of opening shortly before *Not as a Stranger*, a major studio blockbuster, also starring Mitchum. With all its resources behind the latter, not much was invested in "merchandising" *The Night of the Hunter,* which was a commercial failure. Laughton was never given another chance to direct a film. The movie, however, has refused to go away. It is frequently shown in art theaters and in revival houses. It appears on late-night television. It has achieved something of "classic" status, while *Not as a Stranger* has been forgotten.

[1] A detailed discussion of method in applied psychoanalysis is beyond the reach of this paper. See Baudry (1984), Gabbard (1997), Hanly (1992), and Reed (1982).

[2] Although Agee is credited with the script, reportedly he was so ill at the time that the screenplay he wrote was unusable. Laughton rewrote the screenplay in its entirety (Callow 1988).

To begin with, the film seems to be a "chiller," eccentric and weird to be sure, but a chiller nonetheless. Its main outline is simple. It is the story of an unscrupulous evangelist preacher who preys on widows for their money, insanely following the voice of God. He eventually marries and then kills a mother (Willa) and torments her children (John and Pearl) while trying to find the hidden booty from their father's (Ben's) bank robbery. Certainly these are the ingredients of a tale of terror. But although the content takes into account elements of the film (i.e., terror, menace), its formal structure conceals a fundamental constituent. The movie is a fairy tale, Gothic to be sure, but still a fairy tale.

To help the discussion, I will present a "first reading"—a translation or "prose reading"—of the text that attempts to reveal its structure. Of course a movie cannot be presented adequately through this device, just as a patient cannot be adequately presented in a clinical case report. To those unfamiliar with the film, it is an effort to grasp its form and essential contents.

THE FILM TEXT

Once upon a time, in a distant place, a boy named John lived with his parents and his sister, little Pearl. The times were hard and John's father, Ben, barely scratched out a living in the dusty river town where they all lived. In those harsh days homeless children roamed the woodlands without food, traveled the highways and rivers, and slept in old abandoned car bodies on junk heaps. There were neither men nor women alive who didn't lust for that which they didn't have, nor burn with hatred for "them that had."

And so Ben robbed a bank and killed two men. He took the money and ran home to his children, where he stuffed it into the rag doll that little Pearl always carried around. Then he swore both children to secrecy, but to John was passed the responsibility for little Pearl and all that money. Ben made John swear to tell no one about the money—not even his mother, Willa, who "had no common sense"—and to guard little Pearl with his life. Then John saw blue men take

Ben away and, oh no!, the blue men beat his father who said, before he fell, "Mind what you swore, son!" Ben was hung for the murders, keeping his silence; the money was never found. He took his secret to the grave, leaving it to John, his good and true son, to bear that secret forever.

And then one day a "preacher" came to the dusty town, singing sweetly in the night as he traveled. He sought out John's mother and courted her. He told all concerned that he had consoled Ben, serving as his pastor in his last days in prison, and pretended great concern for the children, "those fatherless little lambs." But he was an impostor, a monstrous man interested only in money, a ravening wolf in sheep's clothing, a secret murderer of widows. Meanwhile, two busybodies, Icey and her husband Walt, who owned an ice cream parlor in town, "overcome" by righteous concern for Willa and her "poor, poor lambs," tried to arrange for "preacher" Harry Powell—for that was his name—and Willa to marry.

And marry they did. It was to be a marriage on the purest and highest level. For Willa realized that she had lusted for the stolen money as she had once lusted for Ben and now lusted for the preacher. When the preacher told her that the money was at the bottom of the river, she was so relieved that she felt herself just "a-quiverin' with cleanness." And now on her wedding night the preacher cleansed her of desire and Willa thanked the Lord for sending him to her.

But the preacher knew that the money must be hidden somewhere, and as he had harangued Ben in prison—for he had really been Ben's cell mate—he now did the same with John. "John, where's the money hid?" he would say. But John was loyal to his father and recognized evil when he saw it, even if no one else did. That "man of God" seemed to have bewitched everyone around him: the townspeople, Willa (who accused John of lying when he told her of the incessant questioning), and even little Pearl who now loved the preacher as though he were her own father.

One misty night Willa came home after long hours of work and heard the preacher with her own ears. That cruel man was pleading, "Where's the money hid?" and then he screamed at little Pearl, call-

ing her a wretch. Willa rushed into the house in disbelief. That night, after mumbling her prayers, while she was lying in her bed denying the meaning of what she heard, the preacher cut her throat from ear to ear! He carried her body to her old Model T and drove the car into the river. There she sat, her face serene, the current drifting her long hair across her gashed throat.

Well, when John found his mother gone the next day, he suspected the worst and knew he must run, for surely the preacher would torture and murder little Pearl and him. And so he tried to trick the preacher by telling him that the money was in the cellar under a stone. But the preacher forced them both to go with him and found that John had lied. When the preacher went into a towering rage and threatened them both with his knife, little Pearl, in terror, told the preacher where the money was. John then knocked a prop from under a shelf and down came a cascade of jars and bottles, knocking the preacher over. Then John pulled Pearl away and they ran up the stairs till they finally got out of the cellar. It was not one moment too soon, for the preacher was just behind them. The children then ran to the river, took Ben's skiff, which Uncle Birdie (an old river man) had fixed up for John, and got it into the water just a twinkling of an eye before the preacher fell howling into the muck, unable to catch them.

Thus began days and nights of a perilous flight down the river. For it seemed that the preacher Harry never slept. His sweet song was always nearby. But John persisted, though the nights were dark and the owls hooted and the dogs barked.

One morning as the sun rose and the rooster crowed, there, like a vision, old Rachel appeared. And she whisked little Pearl and John to her house to give them a good washing. At first she was ever so frightening with her heavy shoes and tough manner. But after a bit John felt less scared. There were other children too: Mary, Clary, and Ruby. They all seemed to be part of a family. John could hardly remember where he came from or who Willa and Ben were—but he knew that they were dead. He remembered his secret and lived in fear of the day when the preacher would come. And come he did one bright shiny day, with a stick-

knife in his hand. But loving old Rachel was there a-ready with her big shotgun. And the preacher ran off, snarling that he would return.

In the dark at night he did come back. He crooned his soft gospel song so sweetly that Rachel, sitting in her rocking chair, joined in. The mist made the night dark, but the moonlight reflected off it in strange ways so that Rachel could see the preacher silhouetted outside the window. Suddenly he was gone and there was nothing but silence. In the dark Rachel gathered her flock around her and told them stories. The clock struck three and suddenly a shadow was there. "Hide in the staircase, children," said Rachel as she faced the darkness.

"What do you want?"

"Them kids."

"I'm giving you to the count of three to get out that screen door, then I'm comin' across this kitchen shootin'."

And as the preacher's satanic face appeared, his hand lifting the open knife, she fired the gun. The preacher ran off, yipping and yelping into the barn with all the other animals.

In the morning the blue men came and they arrested the preacher. It was exactly as with Ben. John turned sick. "Don't, don't!" he cried. And he ran out with the doll, flogging the preacher with it.

"Here! Here! Take it back! I can't stand it, Dad! It's too much, Dad! I don't want it! I can't do it! Here! Here!"

There was a trial. John couldn't look at the preacher. John couldn't convict him, couldn't convict his Dad. The burden was so great. He didn't know what was going on.

And then it was Christmas. The children were all gathered around. John gave Rachel an apple and Rachel said that was the "richest gift a body could have." Then she gave John a watch. John looked like any boy, rich or poor, with his first watch. But he couldn't speak until Rachel said, "That watch sure is a fine, loud ticker." Then he knew everything would be all right and he was finally aware of everything that had happened. The long night was over. "This watch is the nicest watch I ever had," he said.

And they all lived happily ever after.

FOLK TALES AND OTHER STORIES

The fairy tale is one of a group of overlapping types of stories: myths, fables, cautionary tales, and the like (Bettelheim 1976; Darnton 1984; Frye 1963; Propp 1928, 1984; Tatar 1987, 1992; Thompson 1946; Tolkien 1966; Zipes 1983). All these stories have an oral tradition and are often told rather than read. They take place in the remote and unspecified distant past, but describe patterns that are everlasting. In that sense they explain, as Levi-Strauss (1955) puts it, "the present and the past as well as the future" (p. 173). And so told and retold, written and rewritten, they are passed along from one generation to the next.

These stories have one important element that binds them together. Unconscious fantasy thinking in the individual is brought into relation with the cultural group through the medium of the story. The fantasy thinking is thereby legitimized. We may recall that Arlow (1961) said that myth "is a particular kind of communal experience. It is a *special form of shared fantasy* (italics added), and it serves to bring the individual into relationship with members of his cultural group…" (p. 375). That is, the myth—and I would include all the types of traditional folk stories referred to above—permits the individual to perceive personal needs and conflicts in relation to culture. He can thus experience himself as *part* of a cultural group, accepted as one participating in a shared fantasy, which has been presented in the story.

Despite this central common factor, there are differences among the subtypes mentioned (Bettelheim 1976).[3] The feeling

[3] Recent biographies (Pollak 1997; Sutton 1996) and newspaper articles contain disturbing reports of Bettelheim's abusive treatment of children at the Orthogenic School in Chicago, which he directed. There have also been charges of plagiarism in *The Uses of Enchantment* (Dundes 1991). Some of the ideas I attribute to Bettelheim may indeed be those of Julius Heuscher (1963), although Heuscher himself "had not at all felt he was being plagiarized" (Sutton 1996, p. 13), and the passages involved do not seem to deal with the central arguments I cite. See Sutton (1996) and Pollak (1997) for details of passages. Also see Tatar (1992) for additional details and attribution.

conveyed by a myth is one of absolute uniqueness. The events could never happen to any other person, are awe-inspiring, and could not happen to an ordinary mortal. Whereas the myth conveys uniqueness, in the fairy tale the most unusual and improbable events are presented as ordinary. The most remarkable encounters are related in casual or everyday terms. It leads one to feel, "This could happen to you or me."

The myth is nearly always tragic, the fairy tale almost always happy. Thus the fairy tale is optimistic whereas the myth tends toward pessimism. Bettelheim remarks that "it is this decisive difference which sets the fairy tale apart from other stories in which equally fantastic events occur, whether the happy occurrence is due to the virtues of the hero, chance, or the interference of supernatural figures" (p. 37). In fact it is not clear when or why this change took place (Tatar 1987). But at some point in the eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries, the grotesque, violent, bloody, and perverse tales of oral tradition, which had pretty much been adult fare, changed. They became tales for the nursery, fairy tales with which we have become familiar.

Tolkien (1966) states the essence of the fairy tale is in *Faerie*, "the Perilous Realm itself, and the air that blows in that country" (p. 10), not in elves or fairies. Indeed, *Faerie* is populated mostly by flesh-and-blood human beings, like us, but who exist in a magical place and to whom any number of unusual things happen. As Tolkien points out, "one thing must not be made fun of, the magic itself" (p. 10). The magic must be taken as matter-of-fact.

Very likely the differences between myth and fairy tale are determined in part by the audience for whom the story is intended. The myth, by and large, is meant for the adult, the fairy tale for the child. What the child needs most is to be reassured that there is a happy solution to his problems. "...Therefore reassurance of a happy ending must come *first* because only then will the child have the courage to labor confidently to extricate himself from his...predicaments" (Bettelheim 1976,

p. 39).[4]

In contrast, when the adult confronts a myth his task is different. Members of an audience during and following a performance of Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* are moved and attempt to understand the personal effect it has. That is, revival of conflict and reintegration takes place through the "telling" of the myth in the theater and its reexperience by the individual as a member of the audience (Freud 1900, pp. 262-263).

Because the fairy tale is written for the child, it is also written from the child's point of view, a matter of considerable importance in *The Night of the Hunter*. "An existential dilemma is stated briefly and pointedly" (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 8), which "confronts the child squarely with the basic human predicaments" (p. 8), i.e., death, aging, the loss of a parent. Figures are "clearly drawn, situations simplified" (p. 8). "Evil is as present as virtue, and given body in the form of some figures and their actions, as good and evil are omnipresent in life and the propensities for both are present in every man" (pp. 8-9). Because children cannot understand ambivalence but only polarization, the duality of good and evil must be presented by different people. Bettelheim says, "The figures in fairy tales are not ambivalent—not good and bad at the same time, as we all are in reality. But since polarization dominates the child's mind, it also dominates fairy tales. A person is either good or bad, nothing in between" (p. 9). As we shall see, *The Night of the Hunter* is presented almost entirely from John's point of view, and the figures in the film are presented in polar terms.

Bettelheim also points out that neither myths nor fairy tales are cautionary tales. For example, fables (like the story of the *Ant and the*

[4] Darnton (1984) takes issue with Bettelheim stating, as an example, that *Little Red Riding Hood* does not have the happy ending Bettelheim ascribes to it. In an early French oral version, not only the grandmother but the little girl is devoured. He believes Bettelheim erred in presenting versions of the tale as codified by Perrault and Grimm. But Thompson (1946), an authority Darnton cites, states that there are two endings to the tale, and that the fairy tale happy ending "seems to be designed for the nursery on the theory that children would be shocked unless the little girl were rescued" (p. 39). Thompson's point only strengthens Bettelheim's argument. Bettelheim differentiates the fairy tale from the folk tale, a point that Darnton seems to ignore.

Grasshopper) tell us how to behave and prevent us from being self-destructive. *Oedipus Rex* can "never be experienced as warning us not to get caught in an Oedipal constellation" (p. 38). Quite the contrary, it tells us that "Oedipal conflicts are inescapable" (p. 38). The polarity of the fairy tale permits the child to comprehend easily the difference between good and evil, but it is not presented, as is a cautionary tale, to stress the right behavior. The child chooses to identify with the characters not because of goodness but on the basis of whom he wants to be like.

The extraordinary and magical presented as ordinary; the story presented from the child's point of view; existential predicament and the need of the child for hope; the struggle toward a capacity for genuine ambivalence; the presentation of major unconscious themes of childhood—the movie is built with these elements embedded, establishing a "fairy tale" structure, although, as we shall eventually see, it is not without mythic elements. Our focus can now turn to the film itself.

FORM: THE FILM AS FAIRY TALE

The movie opens with a starlit sky. As the credits are presented, a chorus, off screen, sings a grisly lullaby:

> Dream, my little one, dream.
> All the wonder in the night
> Fills your darling heart with fright;
> Fear is only a dream,
> So dream, little one, dream.

This lullaby, nightmarish in itself, prepares us for a nightmare. A happy ending is presented (i.e., "fear is only a dream"), but hidden (i.e., it is embedded in the song). Thus in the very moments before the story begins, the film is presented to us, the audience, as a perverse bedtime story.

The film continues with Rachel, to whom we will be formally introduced much later, beginning to tell biblical stories to a group of

children, completely different in tone from the lullaby. It is the two together that establish the mood. Rachel says:

> Now you remember, children, how I told you last Sunday about the Good Lord going up into the mountain and talking to the people, and how He said, "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall seek God"; and how He said that King Solomon in all his glory is not as beautiful as the lilies of the field. And I know you won't forget, "judge not, lest you be judged" because I explained that to you.

In the first moments of the movie we hear a cruel lullaby followed by firm, reassuring, biblical storytelling. Behind all of this is a backdrop of a starry sky with disembodied, unreal figures whom we do not know. The movie thus immediately presents a cruel, frightening "bad witch" mother (i.e., the lullaby) and a strong, reassuring "good fairy" mother (i.e., the storytelling Rachel) in an unreal, disembodied setting. From the first this is a story about good and bad, and we can expect the good to be very, very good and the bad to be very, very bad.

As Rachel speaks the camera descends over a winding river to a deserted house in a riverside village. Children playing hide-and-seek discover a murdered woman. We merely see legs and shoes (much like the legs and shoes of the wicked witch crushed by Dorothy's house in *The Wizard of Oz*). This initial shock-like scene is filmed totally from the point of view of the children, a warning for what will follow. What we are to see and hear is to be all like a dream. We are not to expect what we are to see to be real, but we are also expected (from the tone and style of Rachel's presentation to us) to appreciate the strange events we are to hear about in a matter-of-fact way. We have been introduced to a film presented in a style of magical realism. Almost every cinematic device aims at sustaining a mood of magic. If the film does not achieve the grandeur of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, it certainly has its form.

The form is maintained by a variety of expressionist, impressionist, and even pop art techniques. Consider some of the scenes. Early in the film in a burlesque house the preacher's harsh aggressive ex-

pression contrasts with the flat, depressive audience and appears like a satirical painting. A revival meeting, immediately following the marriage of Willa and the preacher, filmed without a set—just flares and ecstatic faces—depicts the total subjugation of Willa to the preacher in a brief scene. The setting of Willa's murder, stark and cathedral-like; prayer and murder set together; the distorted angles in the room; the beatific-appearing Willa; the posture of the preacher as he listens for the voice of God; the murder itself—all are totally unreal, yet graphically portray inner experience. In many nighttime scenes, shadows are thrown in impossible directions, the improbability contributing to the magical unreality and atmosphere of menace.

Later, during the children's flight down a river, the presentation of nature itself (frogs, fireflies, dew-covered spider webs) is so unreal that what might otherwise have been a lyrical scene becomes an expressionistic distortion. Buildings appear flat, two-dimensional, and warped. At a moment of respite while resting in a hayloft during the flight, and eerily lit by a mere slit of moon, Pearl's legs appear from behind a haystack uncannily like those of the murdered woman at the beginning of the film. John in the background looks out on the improbably lit, bleak landscape.

In an earlier escape scene the preacher chases the children up the cellar stairs with outstretched arms for what seems to be endless time, recalling images both of anxiety dreams and of the film version of Frankenstein's monster.

In such scenes horror is combined with farce and pop art, relieving tensions through laughter. The startled, almost "jokey" look on the preacher's face when John knocks out the prop of a shelf and jars tumble on him exemplifies such a scene. Similarly, when the preacher falls howling into the river, having been barely evaded by John and Pearl, his expression stirs laughter as well as menace. The overall effect is stylized, theatrical, and unreal. Yet at the very same time the events are presented as magical, one is expected to accept them as ordinary reality and think, "Yes, this could happen to me."

This use of expressionism results in a nonintrospective film—the characters don't reveal themselves because they are not real characters. Here it is important to reemphasize that the film is made almost

entirely from John's point of view. This is accomplished not only through low shots from the child's eye level, but through the portrayal of characters as a child might see them, viz., all good or all bad. One might say that they are portrayed as one might in a story told to a child like John. The camera becomes the equivalent of a storyteller. Thus the inner conflicts of the characters, their thoughts, and the thematic material are expressed through a variety of external manifestations, not only the characters' utterances, but the backdrop, shapes, and shadows as outlined above. This approach lends itself to characters which are simplified and polar, i.e., the evil preacher; the good, albeit beaten down and weak-willed father, Ben; the good, but foolish Willa; the bad busybodies (Icey and Walt); the innocent (and therefore pre-moral) children; and, of course, the good fairy godmother Rachel.

Of interest, the effect of the film is somewhat different from that of the novel. The novel is highly introspective, the characters' thoughts and motivations made explicit. The effect is to make the novel more realistic, less magical, and more lyrical. Despite the exactness with which the film follows the plot and dialogue of the novel—and both impart a feeling of menace—the film's major effect derives from its stylized imagery. Its emotions and ideas are expressed through light and line as much as plot and action.

Perhaps the subtlest use of cinematic technique is also one of the most important and effective. It is the scene of a picnic early in the film where the preacher, assisted by his "disciple" Icey (the busybody), finally mesmerizes Willa. He tells her, with unctuous naiveté, that Ben threw the stolen money "into the river." Willa is now assured that the preacher loves "her," not her money, and summons John so that he can hear the good news with his own ears. Of course, John knows the preacher is lying. It is a scene where people are gathered together, but separate from one another, each with his or her own inner agenda, an agenda that is not expressed in words: Icey's contempt, hatred, and fear of men; the preacher's greed; Willa's fear of her own lust; John's awesome responsibility. It is a scene which is a turning point in the film because it propels Willa into marriage to the preacher and sets the stage for all that follows.

The scene has been very carefully set by the director in much the same way as a musician "sets" a poem. Elsa Lancaster (1983) states that her husband Laughton "set" the picnic to a vision of Seurat's most famous painting, *La Grande-Jatte*, "which shows a Sunday afternoon in the park, lack of activity, static figures" (p. 240). While the classic impressionists caught the light of the moment as they painted, Seurat made a scientific study of light and color and painted primarily in the studio. *La Grande-Jatte* creates an illusion of reality. The painting, figures frozen in a landscape for all time, invites us to wonder about its people, their lives, and their motivations. With the film stopped to a single frame, we can see its influence. The film, too, presents an illusion of reality. It presents psychic reality, i.e., the inner source of subjective experience, unconscious fantasy (Freud 1900).

There are two explicit references to the fairy tale theme in the movie, both at crucial junctures. One occurs early in the film after Ben has been hanged, when John and Pearl are going to sleep. There is a strange play of shadows on the wall and John, in response to Pearl's request, tells her a story: "Once upon a time," he begins...and unravels a tale of a rich king with a son and a daughter who "gets taken away by bad men." This is the very moment that the preacher makes his presence first known, his ominous shadow on the wall, a shock-like image as in the opening of the movie. The music in the background is Saturday-at-the-movies chiller music. We then hear the preacher singing the hymn, "Leaning on the everlasting arms." John reassures Pearl about the shadow. He says, "It's only a man." Note, by the way, the impossible optics of the scene. Once again illusion fits the emotion of the scene better than objective reality would have. John's comment will also remind us of Freud's ideas about the dream thought, "It's only a dream," i.e., the dream thought reduces the importance of what has been experienced through denial and thereby reduces anxiety. In fact, this scene is followed by the children going to sleep with John reassuring Pearl, and Pearl her doll, through a compulsive ritual: "Night, night; sleep tight; don't let the bedbugs bite."

The second reference to fairy tales occurs at the beginning of the

river journey, immediately after the narrow escape from the preacher. John has collapsed, exhausted, into the bottom of the skiff. The camera focuses on Pearl, and for the first and only time the movie is seen totally from Pearl's point of view. In Balter's (1981) terms, the "frame" of the film (i.e., its convention of being seen through John's eyes) is broken. She sings a song: "Once upon a time, there was a pretty fly. He had a pretty wife, this pretty fly." The boat is drifting through a shimmering night with fireflies. She sings on: "But one day she flew away, flew away. She had two pretty children. But one night these two pretty children flew away, flew away, into the sky, into the moon." The song ends unresolved, i.e., musically. We hear a frog twang. We really do seem to be in an unreal land animated by frogs, spiders, and fireflies. The song is important because it is Pearl's plight made explicit—flight, aloneness, and a defense against the loss of her mother (a flight to the moon)—while she is sitting appealing to her doll, Miss Jenny, for solace, the frame of the film (i.e., its fairy tale structure) momentarily broken, the reality of the character intruding.

These two overt fairy tale references flank the children's first seeing the preacher (an incident of *dread*) and their flight from him (a flight from *menace*).

CONTENT: THE PLOT, OEDIPAL THEMES, AND CONTEXT

What might explain the concealed fairy tale structure of the movie? After all, the film was an artistic and commercial venture intended for an adult audience. Why then was this cinematic form adopted, a form distinctly different from that of the novel? Seeking an answer to these questions requires considering another important theme of the film, the great economic depression in the United States.

The Depression is hardly mentioned in the film but is a backdrop, off screen, as ever-present in the movie as the night, the shadows, and menace. Sometimes we see it directly. During the children's flight down the river we see a poor riverside farmhouse. There is a tired farm woman at the door saying to herself, "Such times, when

young'uns run the road." She can offer John and Pearl only one potato apiece.

Throughout the whole film we hardly ever see a man at work. In fact men are not very much in evidence. Perhaps they are mostly loafing, or drinking, or trying to get work in the mines near Wheeling. The great Ohio River is mostly empty. The old river men are left, like Uncle Birdie, without work, spinning tales of the old days and watching the few remaining riverboats pass by the local landing. The river traffic is gone; farmlands lie fallow; factories and mills are silent. The area in which the film is set is the northern panhandle of West Virginia near Moundsville, down the river from the now largely dormant mills of Pittsburgh where the Ohio courses south between West Virginia and Ohio and then west along the southern border of Indiana and Illinois to meet the Mississippi at Cairo. It is the early 1930s. The proud West Virginia mountain men and women could recall that their parents had refused to secede from the Union along with the Eastern Virginians. A new state, West Virginia, loyal to the Union, was thus born during the Civil War. The children born then, especially men now aged, saw themselves betrayed and emasculated by a society and government for which their fathers and grandfathers had sacrificed much. They were now the forgotten men who sought a new deal, the promise of a future. Their children, the grandchildren of the settlers, exemplified by Ben Harper, are the betrayed.

Ben's very name, Harper, evokes the abolitionist John Brown[5], by some thought to be mad, by others, e.g., Emerson, a saint (Oates 1970). Brown led the raid at Harper's Ferry in 1859. In his zeal to provoke a slave rebellion, thinking himself an instrument of God and repelled by slavery, he led a bloody attack in which his own sons were sacrificed. After a trial he was hanged, as was Ben Harper after *his* raid on the bank. The historical figure of John Brown can be compared to a potential *composite* figure in the film—that of Ben *and* the preacher. When Ben, righteously protecting his children from the injustices of

[5] While the link of Ben Harper to John Brown through the "Harper" of "Harper's Ferry" must be seen as speculative, the historical link to the West Virginia of the Depression and the Civil War is persuasive to me.

the Depression, passed on the stolen money and responsibility for Pearl to John, he placed an almost insurmountable burden on his son. John was nearly killed by the preacher in his zeal to live up to his father's ideals. In fact, John Brown's sons *were* killed at Harper's Ferry supporting *their* father's ideals. The preacher of the film, in horror of women's "profane" temptations of the flesh, listening to the voice of God, killed "widders" to obtain money for God to plead His Word. He served God—a bizarrely distorted composite version of New England puritanism and John Brown's zealous and religious defense of black Americans. Instead of presenting a single, clearly ambivalent figure for a father, the film provides John with a more simplified situation: a "good" father and a "bad" stepfather (Kernberg 1966).

These themes of the 1930s resonating with the Civil War past, both subtly portrayed as a backdrop of the film, create a mythic atmosphere. The pessimistic adult world is a counterpoint to the fairy tale world of the child. Both interact in an important unconscious theme presented in the film. It is a fairy tale version of the "family romance" (Freud 1909). In a typical family romance fantasy, the child imagines and partly believes that one or both of his parents are not his true parents. Often it is the father who is assumed to be false and the real father to be some exalted personage. The child imagines that someday the real parent will appear and that he will be restored to his rightful place.

This subject is taken up directly in the novel. Rachel asks John to get her an apple and to get one for himself. Then she asks John, "Where's your folks?" John answers, "Dead." Later, John lies in bed thinking of the story of Moses that Rachel has told (imagining it to be a story of *two* kings) and, thinking of the preacher, says to himself: "Well, maybe he won't come at all now and maybe it wasn't none of it real and maybe there wasn't even any Mom or Dad or none of it and I am a lost King and Pearl is a lost King, too" (Grubb 1953, p. 219).

The family romance serves the purpose of protecting the youngster from the growing disillusionment with the parent, a disillusionment that is part of the necessary realistic reappraisal of parents as childhood is left behind. Fairy stories of the wicked stepparent per-

mit the child to identify with the plight of the youngster in the story (e.g., Cinderella) and give the child the satisfaction of seeing the stepparent destroyed without directly mobilizing aggression at his own, now degraded, real parent.

While John has the hateful preacher (a stepfather) to contend with ("You ain't my Dad! You won't never be my Dad!"), he does not have to contemplate the enormity of his own father's act, *nor his own fantasy life.* Here the central importance of this being a film to be seen from John's point of view becomes most evident.[6] John's fantasy life can best emerge through the use of a fairy tale format as long as his point of view, the point of view of a child, dominates and allows the relationship between the simplified characters to express it. At one level, as previously mentioned, the preacher as enemy protects John against the direct mobilization of aggression toward his own, potentially devalued father. It also protects him against the awareness of the fulfillment of his wishes—for he now has his father's power (i.e., his money) and his woman (i.e., Pearl, a substitute for his mother), an oedipal fulfillment. The film actually makes this explicit when we are shown a momentary glimpse of a graffiti on a wall: John loves Pearl. Even there the subtlety of the film is expressed—for the word "Pearl" is ambiguous and unclear. All through the film visual shocks (the opening vision of the murdered woman; *seeing* the shadow of the preacher; *looking through* the ice cream parlor window to see the preacher telling stories to Pearl) hint that in the past curiosity has led John to observe (or fantasize) frightening primal scenes and therefore fear danger from a wrathful father who therefore must be idealized and/or appeased.

Looked at from another angle one might say that Ben, disillusioned by a seceding Virginia and a fatherland which betrayed him after his grandfather bore the burden of standing against slavery, rejected its values and robbed and murdered. When he knows that he is

[6] We might wonder why the film is seen through John's (rather than Pearl's) eyes. It would be interesting to construct a parallel story, through Pearl's eyes, but the data of the film does not easily allow us to do that because its formal structure centers on John. Pearl is subordinated. Half the audience may be less than satisfied!

trapped and will be hung, Ben will not save his neck by telling where the money is. Rather he passes it on to John, who must now bear the burden of manhood.

But it is manhood passed on from a devalued father. Indeed, all the men in the film are portrayed as impotent and weak, i.e., other than the mythic and fairy tale central figures (Ben, the "preacher," John). Walt is ridiculed by his wife, Icey, for his sexual desire. Uncle Birdie, the old river man, sentimentalizes the past and imagines days of past glory, but is tyrannized by a picture of a wife dead for twenty-five years. The preacher appeases God whose voice he listens for; he is God's good boy killing women, "perfume smellin' things, lacy things, things with curly hair." By the killings he both submits to God, the father, and denies his own sexual desire—a dangerous and extreme regressive oedipal solution. But of course he too, finally, is abandoned by God.

A pre-adolescent boy, disillusioned with a father perceived as undeserving of his mother, has recourse to at least two solutions: he can imagine himself the son of an exalted man, a true father (i.e., a typical family romance fantasy), or he can idealize his father. What he cannot do is imagine himself in his father's place, i.e., without becoming psychotic.

In the film John idealizes his father and is determined to carry out his burden. He will be a "little man" and take care of Pearl and never tell anyone about the money. For the movie viewer, the presence of the wicked stepfather who may be hated and feared, alongside John's idealization, provides a perfect solution to the viewer's revived oedipal predicament.

There is yet another vicissitude which provides additional solutions for the viewer and the characters. It is the promise of a happy ending. After the ordeal of near capture by the preacher, there is a journey down the river. The river is a supportive and a safe mother. It is a passageway, a regressive way into the womb. But it is also a way out, a potentially wondrous trip along the Ohio, to the Mississippi, to the Gulf of Mexico, to the world, even to "the sky and the moon."

When Rachel appears, like a good fairy, a number of problems are solved for John. Rachel accepts John's gift of an apple, one might

say his sexuality, and authorizes his masculinity by her gift of a watch. There has been, until this point in the movie, a long period of dissociation. When John buffets the preacher with the doll stuffed with the stolen money, he says, "Here! Here! Take it back! I can't stand it, Dad! It's too much, Dad! I don't want it! I can't do it!" This is the cry of an overburdened, frightened oedipal boy. His fusion of the two (Ben and the preacher) into one—Dad—terrifies him. As a child he is not yet capable of genuine ambivalence toward his father. Rachel has taken over from the dead Willa, but rather than tell him he should love the preacher—as Willa did—she kills him, or at least contributes to his death, and finally legitimizes John. It is all right to have oedipal desires because there can be a happy end!

These scenes may also remind us of the many unemployed men for whom selling apples symbolized their despair. Apples are a powerful image throughout the film: selling apples, greed, tenderness, and sexuality. The men of the Depression took hope from a New Deal with its profusion of alphabet agencies and, pertinent to this movie, a bank holiday. There was again the promise of a future. The theme song of the time was "Happy Days Are Here Again," and its folk hero, of course, FDR—a great victor in the 1932 election.

The structure of the film—i.e., its embedded fairy tale structure—has particular advantages. Its fairy tale happy ending promises a resolution of oedipal problems, just as the New Deal promised a generation of men that they would indeed be permitted to be men again. The existential predicament of frightened, degraded, and angry adult men in West Virginia during the 1930s directly parallels that of the problems of the oedipal boy who fears his own parricidal wishes and tries to resolve them through idealization and/or wishful fantasy, i.e., a family romance.

DISCUSSION: OEDIPUS COMPLEX AND SITUATION

In the movie we face two directions simultaneously, viz., external reality (the Great Depression) and psychic reality (the family romance

and the Oedipus complex). While the oedipal boy attempts to resolve his problems through a family romance, adults who so proceed do so at their peril. Economic and political problems require economic and political solutions. How the adult responds will depend, at least in part, on the vicissitudes of previous mythic oedipal solutions. At the height of the economic depression of the 1930s, the American populace turned to a strong paternal leader (FDR) and a number of fairy tale heroes and heroines (e.g., Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers) for solutions and hope, respectively.

The film presents a version of the oedipal situation and invites us to experience it. We will remember (Rose 1959) that Laius, fearing the prediction of Apollo that his own son will kill him, sends his infant son Oedipus out to be exposed and to die, first putting spikes through his feet so that his ghost cannot walk. Jocasta, his wife, is his accomplice. The movie presents not only a wicked stepfather (the preacher) and an idealized but weak Ben, but two "damaged couples" (Feldman 1989, 1990) as parents—Ben and Willa, and the preacher and Willa. Neither couple protects the children. In fact, both couples endanger them. John, who "knows" truth, is especially endangered. Now external reality *confirms* psychic reality. John's only recourse is defensive dissociation, an extreme psychopathological adaptation, until he is finally "saved" by Rachel.

In recent years there has been considerable emphasis on the role of trauma in human development and later psychopathology (Herman 1992). Some (Masson 1984)[7] have proposed that Freud dissimulated in supposedly denying the significance of childhood trauma and seduction in order to promulgate the centrality of the Oedipus complex. Others (Kohut 1977, 1984) suggest that the Oedipus complex is not an inevitable maturational necessity, but rather a frequent pathological formation resulting from not-good-enough parent–child interaction ("[empathic]...failures from the side of narcissistically disturbed parents," 1977, p. 247). Simon (1991) has surveyed the political, scientific, and epistemological complexities that

[7] Grubrich-Simitis (1988; 1997, p. 63-64) has clearly demonstrated the oversimplification and incorrectness of these charges. See also Freud (1939).

beset an examination of the Oedipus complex, a veritable minefield of obstacles.[8]

Recently Feldman (1990) stated that: "Many analysts have...come to recognize the presence of earlier, more primitive versions of the oedipal fantasies, and here the primary objects are often represented in a damaged state, not always differentiated from one another, and often felt to be threatening" (p. 37). He suggests that "when we extend the concept of the Oedipus complex to include the expression of early and primitive phantasies about the nature and interaction of the parental couple, we encounter features of these objects—including their vulnerable and damaged state—which are more frightening and more damaging than phantasies of apparently powerful, successful parental sexuality, and these consequently constitute a more serious threat to the discovery of psychic truth" (p. 41). Facing a dreadful reality in which he was virtually helpless to protect his family, Ben plundered a bank and killed two men and then passed on the burden to his son John.

Some have preferred to think of two complexes in interaction with each other, a Laius and an Oedipus complex (Bergmann 1992; Devereux 1953). I prefer to think of an oedipal *situation* (sometimes including a damaged couple like Laius and Jocasta) from which the familiar Oedipus complex emerges. This formulation does justice to the complexity of the original myth and the potential role of trauma. The father (Laius) *in fact* puts spikes through his son's feet and sets him out to die from exposure. He may well be responding to a fantasy—may we say an oedipal fantasy?—attributed to Apollo, that his son will kill him. Oedipus unwittingly kills Laius. This is a tragic story of catastrophic abuse followed by an equally tragic and catastrophic enactment by Oedipus. The movie parallels the myth in its presentation of trauma interacting with fantasy.

The formulation of an oedipal situation also encourages us to

[8] For example, Friedman and Downey (1995) have recently surveyed biological influences on mental representations of father–son aggression, focusing on testosterone influence on rough-and-tumble play. They propose that the sexual element that Freud suggested is a more variable element of the Oedipus complex than the aggressive element.

consider the range of a parental couple's possible relationships and behaviors—from mature, protective, and intact to primitive, threatening, and damaged—as a matrix out of which oedipal fantasies are shaped in the child and which, indeed, may be later enacted.

We may now finally return to the odd power of the film and its combined fairy tale, mythic form. By maintaining the fairy tale structure (the film through John's eyes) with its mythic backdrop (the off-stage Depression of the 1930s as it affects Ben), the movie portrays quite well a traumatic oedipal situation in which a vulnerable father and damaged couples (Ben and Willa, the preacher and Willa) lead to a primitively skewed and dissociated Oedipus complex (John). The fairy tale structure (hope) in apposition with its off-stage mythic elements (pessimistic inevitability) permits members of an audience to grapple with central oedipal situations for themselves. I believe this is why the film has endured.

Shengold (1989), in his book about the effects of childhood abuse and deprivation, comments usefully about the conundrum of human experience: "Too much and too little are qualities of experience.... Too much too-muchness we call trauma. Too much not-enoughness inhibits proper maturation" (p. 1). Later he adds, "The sins of the father are laid upon the children—but not, as Freud has shown, upon innocent children. Children are easy to seduce because they want to be seduced" (p. 4). While all parents may at times be seductive and at other times frustrate their children, relatively few severely abuse or deprive them. Most are "good enough." The vicissitudes of oedipal situations vary widely and, as *The Night of the Hunter* invites us to consider, with varying outcomes. One need not deny the power of fantasy to be aware of abuse or deprivation. One need not deny the Oedipus complex in order to credit the power, even the tragic power, of the environment.

A "cult" interest in *The Night of the Hunter* has kept the movie alive. This interest represents a cultural response to its embedded structure, a variation of that presented by Sophocles. Close study of *The Night of the Hunter* promotes a rereading of *Oedipus Rex,* which in turn fosters new ways of organizing psychoanalytic observations in the consultation room.

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