

HEALING FICTIONS: THERAPY CASES AND STORIES

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During Freud's era psychoanalytic cases were published as case histories or case studies and they were considered scientific documents - evidence of a medical process which might support theoretical propositions. Several of Freud's most famous cases, the Wolf Man, Dora, the Rat Man, no matter how discredited they might be now, have become almost mythical as stories about the workings and interpretations of psychoanalysis. These have been "specimen" cases, used as reference and teaching tools throughout the evolution of psychoanalysis. At some point (not actually known) these specimen cases shifted from being medical/ scientific stories to being "healing fiction". Not all psychoanalysts will agree with my characterization, but questions of "truthfulness" and "accuracy" in reporting psychotherapy cases may be off target.

Freud has been criticized for possibly inventing some information about these cases. Many critics of psychotherapy, and particularly of Freud, point to the possible fabrication of case material as evidence of the bankruptcy of psychoanalysis as a science. This reminds me of the extended controversy within cultural anthropology in the U.S. in the early 1970s about the possible invention of cultural material presented in a series of popular books by anthropologist Carlos Casteneda, "The Teachings of Don Juan" (1968), "A Separate Reality" (1971), etc. Anthropologists were incensed that Casteneda possibly wrote fictional novels and passed them off as field reports of the Yaqui Indians and a key "informant", Don Juan, from an undisclosed location in Mexico. Some books and many articles written by angry anthropologists were published in an attempt to completely discredit Casteneda as a legitimate field anthropologist. I used his books in my cultural anthropology classes and they were extremely popular with students. My position was that all field work by anthropologists is somewhat fictional (including my own in Liberia and the Micronesian Islands). Early anthropologists, such as Bronislaw Malinowski, Franz Boas, Margaret Mead, did not have some of our current technological recording devices.

They carried small notebooks into which they continually noted their observations and insights. Most of my own field data in the 1960s was written in such a notebook. My own experience of trying to remember exactly what an interviewee said, when I had either had too much local drink in the men's circle, my language knowledge was inadequate, or I had waited until the next morning, thereby relying on my memory before recording data, is no doubt common enough among field researchers. My key informant on Ulithi, Micronesia, told me he had invented some of what he had "translated" for the anthropologist who preceded me, since the anthropologist could not speak the language and would become frustrated when this informant could not come up with English words in an interview with an islander. This informant (translator) was not fluent in English even years later when I arrived. The field anthropologist published the "authoritative" field study of the Ulithi culture. I doubt that this was an isolated incident in the workings of field anthropologists and their representation of cultural data.

My point in relating case studies in psychotherapy to field studies in anthropology is that both are, at least in part, fictions. James Hillman, in "Healing Fiction" (1983) makes this point about Freud's, Jung's and Adler's therapy cases. Hillman suggests three types of case (histories) stories as fictions:

1. Case history as factual history, a true account or knowledge about the succession of events through which anything passes is a fiction in the sense of a fabrication, a lie. But it is only a lie when it claims literal truth. Early on in the taking down of case histories, Freud found that he was not recording a true account of historical events, but fantasies of events as if they had actually happened.

2. Case history is a fiction in the sense of an invented account of the imagined interior processes of a central character in a narrative story. Its writer is not the main character, that is it is not autobiography, nor is it biography since the narrative events are severely selected by the demands of the plot. Essential to this fictional form is the empirical disguise.

3. Case history, as the presentation of literal statements transposed to where they cannot be controverted or verified, is a fiction in the

philosophical sense, i. e., a formula that must necessarily posit itself as beyond criteria of true or false.

That therapy stories or histories might be interpreted as fictions, does not mean they are not valuable or practically useful in a therapy process. Just as Carlos Casteneda's books may have been fictions, though they acted as cautionary tales, therapy fictions of various sorts expand and inform our knowledge and insights about all aspects of the therapy process.

I want to expand Hillman's interpretations to include therapy stories as depicted in films, television, memoirs, and novels, wherein the therapy process, therapists, and patients (clients) are centrally featured. I am interested in how these media re-present or fictionalize psychotherapy to the U.S. culture. Has therapy been depicted differently over time, as more people have been in therapy of one sort or another? What might be variations in re-presentations depending on the genre? I intend to explore these and related questions in this paper.

As more people in the U.S. have had at least some familiarity with different types of psychotherapy - particularly since World War Two – various media have also re-presented mental illnesses and treatments and relationships between patients (clients) and therapists in increasingly realistic depictions. As an example, in the Hitchcock 1945 film, "Spellbound", Ingrid Bergman as the psychoanalyst and Gregory Peck as the patient are represented almost archetypically in classic psychoanalytic fiction, which is quite jokey to many of us now. Classic psychoanalysis was becoming more widely practiced and eventually dominated treatments in hospitals throughout the U.S. in the 1950s, so "Spellbound" may have seemed somewhat realistic to audiences in the 40s and 50s.

By the year 2008, however, a similar depiction would be a send-up. Our current depictions of psychotherapy in film and television are not necessarily of psychoanalysis and can re-present therapists as real people with real treatment skills. Examples might be Robin Williams as the therapist in "Good Will Hunting" (1997), and the therapist in "Lars and the Real Girl" (2007), or Dr Malfi who treats Tony Soprano in "The Sopranos" television series and very recently, the television series "In Treatment" with

Gabriel Berne as the therapist with several different patients and in sessions with his therapy supervisor, Diane Weist.

Of course we have had comedic depictions in films of therapists and the therapy process all along. Therapy has played a part in many of Woody Allen's films, with Woody as the patient who spoofs psychoanalysts as foils for his jokes about the therapy process. From "What's New Pussy Cat" (1965) with Peter Sellers as a Viennese psychoanalyst to "High Anxiety", the 1977 send-up with Mel Brooks as a psychiatrist with vertigo, to "What About Bob?" (1991) with Bill Murray as a borderline patient who drives his therapist, Richard Dryfuss, into a homicidal psychotic rage, we are all able to find humor in the spoofing of therapists and therapy. The more recent comedies, "Analyze This" (1999), and "Analyze That" (2002) with Robert DeNiro as the gangster with anxiety attacks and Billy Crystal as his reluctant therapist seem to be spoofs of the Tony Soprano and Dr Melfi therapy sessions, though the film makers apparently were not aware of each other's projects. The theme of the gangster with anxiety attacks seeking a therapist is treated both very realistically and comedically.

Glen O. Gabbard and Krin Gabbard have written the authoritative book "Psychiatry and the Cinema" (1999), and Glen Gabbard has written a book "The Psychology of the Sopranos" (2002). "Psychiatry and the Cinema" traces the history of the various depictions of therapy, therapists and patients in U.S. (and some foreign) films. Many of these films do not feature psychotherapy as central to the plot or characters, but it is obvious in reading this book that psychotherapy has influenced film makers and in turn the film going public since the beginning of the twentieth century.

A variation of case stories which as a genre has become rather influential in the last few decades is the memoir about a patient's illness and therapy process. A few prominent people published memoirs of their analysis with Freud. H.D. wrote "Tribute to Freud" (1956), Abram Kardiner wrote "My Analysis with Freud" (1977), and Lou-Andreas-Salome wrote "The Freud Journal" (1964). These memoirs provide an inside view of Freud's clinical techniques, at times not conforming to the techniques most often practiced by classical psychoanalysts.

More recently we have had a plethora of personal accounts of emotional and physical trauma and a variety of “disorders” as designated by the DSM-IV. These accounts sometimes include hospital experiences. Most recent memoirs focus on the journey into and through illness and into and through psychotherapy. Most of the current memoirists are effective story-tellers and their case stories are “cautionary tales” which inform us about the various diagnosed illnesses, such as Borderline Personality Disorder, Depressions and Bi-Polar Disorders as well as what therapies seem to have worked and which ones did not. In many cases – for the more serious disorders- some form of drug therapy was combined with some form of talk therapy.

Among the best writers of this genre is Lauren Slater, whom I have previously written about and who is currently a psychotherapist herself. She has written a series of books about her own illnesses and therapy process, to include “Welcome to My Country” (1997), “Prozac Diary” (1998), and “Lying” (2001). These are fictive in the sense that they are stories as remembered by the storyteller / patient and real life events are reconstructed according to selective and imperfectly recorded memories. Memoirs are not autobiographies but are stories about slices of life events. Traumatic events may carry extra memory weight in the recollection and telling of the stories. The line between memoir and partial fiction is likely very thin. The line between pure fiction and partial memoir may also be thin. The recent controversy over James Frey’s memoir/fiction “A Million Little Pieces” (2003) is an example of our ongoing concern about distinguishing between “fact” and “fiction”. Had Frey’s book been published as “pure” fiction it would not likely have been the best seller that it became. We are in an era when dysfunctional family stories and extreme psychological suffering stories are resonating with a large audience.

Enter “pure” fiction about therapy and therapists. My research has not turned up many novels with psychotherapy as the central theme or character. For whatever reasons the film genre has represented psychotherapy fictionally in ways that novels have rarely done. Irvin Yalom is the principal representative of the “pure” fiction genre and his work is very recent. Since he is also a psychotherapist his novels carry insider weight and knowledge. His novels, “When Nietzsche Wept” (1992), “Lying on the Couch” (1996), and “ The Schopenhauer Cure” (2006) are

relatively popular, though not of best seller status. I don't think his work would be considered great literature, though each book does probe some interesting psychological and philosophical issues. Allen Wheelis wrote "The Doctor of Desire" (1987), which is about a San Francisco psychoanalyst (which Wheelis was) who has an obsession over his young female patient. Along with Irvin Yalom, Wheelis probes the psychoanalytic process from the analyst's point of view, though his protagonist speaks, thinks, feels in the first person, whereas Yalom's are all in the third person. There is definitely a confessional experience imparted with the first person account and thus more psychoanalytic and self confessional.

Reflecting on Bakhtinian theory about the novel, it occurs to me that his idea about dialogic discourse is an appropriate framework for thinking about case stories, memoirs and fiction about psychotherapy. All psychotherapy is at least a dialogue between a "healer" (under whatever guise) and a "patient" (under whatever guise). The settings, situation and other contextual parameters will vary, yet at bottom there is a relationship which becomes an essential element of the "therapy story". Each "case" is a dynamic story. As in a novel a case story includes multiple voices and viewpoints, though there are two primary protagonists with predominant viewpoints. The stories are told on multiple levels – conscious constructions of current events, conscious reconstructions of past events, unconscious fears, desires, resistances of current and past events, interpretations of actual and imagined behavior, perceptions, fears, hopes, and dynamic dialogue between a therapist and patient which includes speech, silences, probing, prodding, resistances, emotional struggles and breakthroughs, psychological insights, plus transference-counter-transference thoughts, feelings, and behavior.