

THE CASE OF 'J': A PSYCHOANALYTIC CASE STUDY WITH PARTICULAR ATTENTION TO 'MARRIAGE NEUROSIS'

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I met a 75 year-old physician at my club, to whom I shall refer as 'J'.² As we are both medical men, we were naturally drawn to each other, and he spoke freely about his life. Being more of a listener than a talker, perhaps a result of years of practising psychoanalysis, I was more reticent about my own life. However, I listened to his stories with considerable interest, for his life has been interesting, indeed. He was trained as a surgeon, but he is also well known as an author. He has had occasion to room with a consulting detective and has penned a well-read series of chronicles of the cases of his friend. I had never taken the opportunity to read these stories, having regarded them as a somewhat vulgar, popular form of entertainment. However, after meeting J, I read them with considerable interest, and I found them to be intriguing and well-crafted accounts, offering as much insight into their author as perspective on their ostensible detective subject.

Indeed, J never disclosed to me in private anything that he had not already disclosed to the general public through his writings. However, his statements and writings provide such a wealth of information about this fascinating personality that I, given my training, could not help but to view them from a psychoanalytic perspective. My notes resulted in a very instructive psychoanalytic case study. I offer this with the caution that it is based largely on the indirect and imperfect evidence of published stories. I justify this limitation partly on the grounds that the great Dr Freud himself worked insightfully with similar limitations in his studies of Moses, Leonardo da Vinci, and other historical figures unavailable to his penetrating direct analysis.³ More than a thousand pages of first-person text may provide more material from J than a year of analysis in my consulting rooms.

J was always affable but correct in his demeanour, a solidly middle-class professional without the 'airs' of aristocracy. He was a loyal Englishman who took evident pride in the Empire. Through the years, because of his association with his fellow lodger and friend, he has met most of the ruling politicians and royalty of the time. He had been a surgeon in the army during the Afghan War and was sent back to London because of an injury he received during that conflict.

He then practised medicine off and on over the years, though it appears that the majority of his income was derived from the publication of the adventures his friend and he experienced.

J has said very little about his family. He had one brother who died in 1888. Apparently, he viewed his brother's life and death as rather tragic. His brother had an addiction to alcohol, which affected his fortunes while he was alive and eventually ruined his liver, ultimately resulting in his death. J has mentioned no other siblings. In all of our discussions and in his writing, he never mentioned his parents or his ancestry, though undoubtedly he was brought up in Scotland. J has been married at least twice, and he has never mentioned any children from either marriage. The first marriage that he has mentioned was in 1888. He apparently proposed marriage to this woman after knowing her for three days. This marriage lasted nearly six years, when his wife died under undisclosed circumstances in early 1894. His next marriage was in 1902. His wife is still living.

He has always been very complimentary to his friend, the detective. He has often referred to his friend as the best and wisest man whom he had ever known. Their association has been active, off and on, for more than thirty-five years. However, despite their obviously strong friendship, there appear to be intervals when he went for long periods of time without seeing his friend, and they lost complete contact. Inexplicably, he has not seen his friend since 1914, despite their 'close' friendship.

J continues periodically to write chronicles of the adventures he shared with his friend when his friend was in active practice as a consulting detective, and his writings span the forty-year career of his friend's detective career. Though the last recorded case occurred in 1914, J has continued to author accounts of prior cases, including two published this year. These accounts are remarkable reading, not only for their romantic view of his friend's activities, but also for what they reveal about J himself. Between these accounts and my conversations with him, much can be inferred about J's personality.

As I noted, my professional, analytic interest in J was piqued when I read the published accounts of his detective friend's exploits. J had been somewhat evasive about his marriages in our conversations, a reticence that I attributed to the unexplained and, likely, tragic death of his first wife and the possibility that his second marriage was not entirely happy. However, as I perused his writings, I became more puzzled about the number of marriages J had contracted over his life, and found vague evidence of possibly three or four. While it may be simply that J is understandably reluctant to allow the details of his domestic life to intrude into the chronicles of his detective friend, there seemed to me to be a marked conflict about marriage that led me to comb these stories for more clues to J's own experiences. In the end, this case study offers, I hope, some insight

into both J's particularly interesting form of neurosis that has manifested itself in this inability or reluctance to regard marriage in a healthy light and J's method of coping with this neurosis.

Let me begin by reviewing more systematically the evidence offered by J's published accounts of his detective friend. Since these 'adventures' so often deal with crimes and other puzzles that have domestic contexts, it is not surprising that marriages and marriage relations are found in many of the nearly sixty cases that J has published. What is remarkable, however, is the fact that of the twenty-seven cases in which marriage plays a major role in the story, those marriages are portrayed negatively in twenty-four: as tragic; fraught with deception; wracked by infidelity; or ended in the harm or even murder of one spouse by another. Indeed, as I will suggest later, it appears that J has chosen to include some of the cases that comprise the chronicles of his detective friend only because they convey this implicitly tragic view of marriage, and lack any other obvious contribution to the biography of his detective friend.

The first account published by J sets the tragic tone for virtually all of the other marriages that he described over the next forty-odd years. In that story, a young woman was forced to marry a man she did not love, despite the fact that she was in love with another. The young woman died within a month of her marriage, and the man she loved avenged her death by murdering her husband.

The tragic marriage might be regarded as an incidental issue, were it not for the pattern that it initiates. Indeed, a similar theme appears in other cases J has recorded. For example, in another published case, a young woman was forced to marry someone, despite the fact that she was in love with another. As soldiers in India, the man she married had betrayed the man she loved, allowing him to be captured by the enemy in order to remove him as a rival for the woman's affections. When the poor man she had loved made his way back to England after thirty years, her husband became apoplectic and died.

In another published story, a man beat his wife and was murdered in turn by an old admirer of the woman. In yet another story, in a small variation on the theme, a woman was forced into a fraudulent marriage. It takes little imagination to see that this repeated pattern holds some fascination for J.

In another tale, the wife of a man of diplomatic rank gave a highly confidential and inflammatory letter to a spy. This represents an almost incomprehensible level of spousal disloyalty, particularly in the wife of a career government official and diplomat.

In yet another story, a man deceived his wife about his profession, hiding from her the fact that he disguised himself as a common beggar to make money. Indeed, at the outset of this story J found his detective friend in an opium den,

which J had volunteered to visit in hopes of convincing another friend to return to his wife.

In a different story, a man was deceived by his wife, who did not reveal to him that she had a child from a previous marriage. In this tale, the detective played virtually no role, and one must question why J published the case, other than to portray a bad marriage. This is reminiscent of another one of his tales in which a wife demanded that her husband never ask her about her past. Spousal trust is not common in J's accounts.

In a story which has enjoyed some popularity among the *hoi polloi*, a man required that his wife pretend to be his sister, and he subjected her to physical abuse.

In a different story, a man murdered and cut off the ears of his wife and her lover. In yet another, a man similarly killed his wife and her lover. In still one more, a married woman who worked in a circus took a lover, a circus strongman, who eventually killed her husband. Wives appear to be less free to murder, however, and the lion they hoped would cover up their act turned on the woman instead, disfiguring her beyond recognition. This is another case in which J's detective friend was a passive participant, and one wonders why, with more exciting cases among his files, J chose to publish this one. In another story, a husband caused his wife to be imprisoned with her lover in Siberia.

One could go on and on in this vein, cataloguing a virtual encyclopædia of marital disaster in J's accounts of his detective friend. We find marriages that have failed, that become murderous, and in which deceit, lies, suspicion, and tragedy prevail.

Indeed, of the three cases in which marriages are portrayed as relatively stable and healthy, tragedy disrupts at least two. In one case, a couple appears to enjoy a happy marriage, but the husband appears to have died in the end, reportedly lost overboard on the ship in which they had escaped. In another story, a happy marriage was destroyed by another man when he had the husband killed. There appears to be only one uninterrupted happy marriage in all of J's accounts. It may be significant that the only happy marriages that J describes are found among foreigners: North and South Americans or Italians. His fellow-countrymen and women suffer marriage less happily.

Of all the patterns one can perceive in J's writings, the most obvious is his portrayal of marriage in an overtly hostile light. The puzzle presented here is that J appears to have no overt or obvious reason to regard marriage as a dangerous institution, a tragic relationship, or a setting saturated with lies, mistrust, and deceit. Yet he consistently portrays marriage in such ways in his writings. His own marriages appear in print to have been happy, and so we must look to his unconscious for reasons why he might have chosen so often to introduce

unhappy marriages into his accounts, to portray the institution in such jaundiced terms. If we regard J's extensive writings as projective exercises in which he selected, shaped, and highlighted elements in ways that are revealing of his personality, we might examine those writings with sensitivity to what they might reveal.⁴ Therefore, let us for a moment consider the tales written by J to be similar to a series of projective exercises and consider what analytic insights we may gain from them.⁵

It may be helpful to begin by noting that J's own first marriage is itself something of a puzzle. He met his bride-to-be and proposed to her three days later. This is a most unlikely act for an English gentleman, for whom a certain typical emotional reticence would be more likely. But in this case, the surrounding circumstances may have prompted J to act with a kind of haste that might be regarded as reckless.

I reported previously that this marriage occurred in 1888. Several events coincided around this time, judging from J's published writings and from our private conversations, and they may have become blended or merged in J's mind. First, J went out of his way to recount in print an incident in which his detective friend drew several conclusions from J's pocket watch. Specifically, while the watch originally had belonged to J's father (which one could tell from the engraving), J's older brother had inherited it. This older brother had met a bad end, falling into poverty, finally drinking himself to death, and the watch had been pawned at various times during his unhappy decline. After his brother's death, the watch passed to J. Although J included this scene in his story ostensibly to demonstrate his friend's remarkable deductive skill, we may wonder if J had another, perhaps unconscious, motive for recounting this scene. This is noticeable, particularly since it leads J to reveal publicly information about his family that he clearly regarded as private and of a sensitive nature.

J commented to his friend that he had recently come into possession of the watch, and we may conclude that J's older brother had recently met his unhappy end. I speculate and propose that J's relationship with his brother had been highly ambivalent: the younger brother who is jealous of his older brother—no doubt the favourite of their parents, as oldest sons so often are, as evidenced by the brother inheriting the watch from his father—but who cannot express that jealousy and envy, since these are socially disapproved emotions to harbour towards one's sibling. No doubt the brother's failures made the parental favour all the more bitter for J. The favoured son was unable to live up to his parents' expectations and hopes, while J, perhaps sublimating his jealousy, became a respected professional man and successful author.

And so we have J in 1888, troubled emotionally by the death of his older brother—grief over his death, resentful of his brother for being the favoured

child, guilty over his own jealousy of the brother, unable to resolve that guilt now that the brother is dead, resentful of his parents for favouring his brother, resentful yet again for being unable to resolve his emotions now that his brother has stolen the chance from him by dying. It is not surprising that J experienced the jumble of conflicting emotions that led him to invite his detective friend's deductions and then respond with angered outrage when those deductions proved all too accurate—let alone take the further remarkable step of describing the entire sad incident in print for all the world to see.[§] Nor is it surprising then that J, feeling conflicting emotions and feeling the loss of his one and only sibling, might supplant that loss by proposing marriage to a woman, even though he hardly knew her.

But J's neurosis is almost certainly deeper than this sibling rivalry. The ambivalence he experiences is certainly familiar to my psychoanalytic colleagues, who so often see it as an overt symptom of repressed hostility towards a parent in neuroses characterised by a failure adequately to resolve the emotional upheavals of the Oedipal phase of psychological development, as pointed out by Dr Freud in his essay *Totem and Taboo*. In J's case, one may reasonably speculate that his ambivalence towards his brother represents the displaced hostility felt towards his father, an unresolved Oedipal hostility that led J unconsciously to regard no man as an adequate husband, and no mother as a loyal wife. Such a psychodynamic conflict would certainly account for J's hostility towards the institution of marriage. Like his detective friend, it remains for us to examine other evidence before we reach a conclusion.

An obvious starting point is the Oedipal conflict itself. First, we may note that Oedipal themes are common in the tales written by J. For example, in the very first of J's short stories, the king of a nation is an obvious father figure whose relations to his 'wives' (both his former lover and his wife-to-be) are clearly troubled. But it is not simply the troubled marriage that emerges from the account, for I have pointed already to the extensive evidence of troubled marriages in these stories. Rather, the relationship between the father figure of the King and the symbolic son—in this case the detective, a surrogate for J him-

[§] The brother's name? It may be James, the name J later notes that J's wife called J (whose name was not James), which he recorded in a later case without any comment. The slip of the tongue is an act of repression of hostile feelings towards J on the part of J's wife, as described by Dr Freud in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. The fact that J published this slip of his wife's tongue is interesting in itself. J's writings were quite popular, and it reflects significant hostility to his wife that J should punish her by publishing such a *faux pas* for his many readers to see. [Original footnote to article (eds.)]

self—that is crucial. It is a classically troubled Oedipal scene, in which the son is at once loving towards the father (the detective takes on the case, less as a mystery than a quest) but also disdainful of him, and a rival. The son—again the displaced J—penetrates the inner sanctum of the symbolic mother (the King's former lover), through the use of an all too phallic rocket, after which he collapses in exhaustion on her couch. The entire time he is disguised as a priest: a father! This story alone, chosen by J to be the first of the short stories published in the series, and therefore of special significance, would be sufficient to establish the unresolved Oedipal conflict at the root of J's neurosis. But this is hardly the last story in which such themes organise events.

In another story, a man falsely accuses his wife of being a vampire who sucks the blood out of her infant when, in fact, she is protecting the infant from attempted poisoning at the hands of its older brother. It seems that the inclusion of this story allowed J to express both his Oedipal feelings at having his mother falsely accused by an unfair father and his latent hostility towards his older brother. The theme is especially prominent inasmuch as the image of the vampire combines both the murderous impulse and the eroticism of the Oedipal instinct.

The unfair father theme is common among his writings. In one story, the father kills one of his daughters and attempts to kill the other, doing so by sending a snake down a false bell rope. In another story, the father pretends to be the suitor of his daughter. In yet another, the father falsely accuses his son of stealing. In another, a father imprisons his daughter. In a different story, the father commits a murder, and the son is accused. The father admits to the crime only after the detective discovers the real culprit. It may be that in J's family history, J's father was unfair both to his mother and to him, and that J's defence mechanism for dealing with his pain is to reflect such behaviour in his writings, the behavioural manifestation of the characteristic hallucinatory representations of potentially gratifying objects.⁶

Another defence mechanism allowing J to deal with his sordid paternal experience is J's near idolisation of his friend the detective. As Dr Freud might point out, J seems to be utilising 'primitive idealisation' in idealising his friend (in this case, a substitute for his father), not only in his own mind, but for his many readers, as well. In profiling his friend in such superlative terms, J is acting out a defence of his father to the public, a defence that his unconscious knows his real father never deserved. J also appears to be using the defence mechanism of reversal (the enacting of a scenario that switches one's subject to object, and vice versa). By telling his friend's story, J is also telling his own.⁷

This speculation about his father's effect on J is buttressed by the fact that both J and his brother possess addictive personalities. As described earlier, J's

brother suffered from addiction to alcohol, which resulted in his untimely demise. J also admitted that he, himself, suffered from an addiction to gambling, and that his friend had to control J's access to available funds. An addictive personality is often the result of childhood trauma, as described by Dr Freud in his essay 'Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis'. It may well be that both brothers, in order to escape the unfair treatment of the father, sought refuge in drink and gambling. As we shall see below, I suspect that the trauma caused by his father, and perhaps his mother's defensive treachery, may have reached a height at J's early age of four or five. When he was older, J may have converted his pain into excitement through the 'sexualisation' of gambling. This would be consistent with someone who has been traumatised during the phallic stage of his development.

As previously noted, phallic references abound in the stories. In two of the stories, people have appendages cut off by assailants. In one of these stories, mentioned earlier, a husband—who has been emasculated by his wife's affair with another man—tracked them down and cut off their ears. In another, a man has his thumb excised. In another story, mentioned above, a father murders one of his two daughters and attempts to murder the other. This story is notable because the father violates his daughters' bedroom by inserting a poisonous snake (a clear phallic reference) through an hole (an air vent) in the wall.

These cases imply that J's neuroses are partly located in his failure to negotiate successfully the phallic stage of his early development, at approximately four or five years old. It may be that J's father abused his mother during the years of J's childhood. Based on the frequency of wives being disloyal to their husbands in his stories, I suspect that J's mother took some defensive or escapist action that J found to be disloyal. This arrested development is supported by J's writings, in which he rather brags that he has wide experience of women that extends over many nations and three separate continents. This Don Juan type of braggadocio is common among men who are trapped in their phallic stage, as Dr Freud points out.

Certainly, the marriage between J's father and mother could not have been a happy one, and this provides the context for J's profiles of marriage within his writings. J appears to be responding to his inner ambivalence about marriage by using the defence mechanism termed the 'reaction formation', the unconscious defence mechanism in which a person develops a socialised attitude that is the direct antithesis of some infantile wish, defences against impulses that are unacceptable to the ego.⁸ An example of this is a person who is, at the subconscious level, homosexual, but whose ego will not allow him to behave in a homosexual manner, so he aggressively attacks homosexuality. In this case, because of J's parents' unhappy marriage, J has an infantile fear of the institution. J's ego

finds opposition to the institution of marriage to be unacceptable: he wanted his parents' marriage to be happy. Therefore, he personally indulges in it several times. However, in his writings, his defence mechanism breaks down, and forces him to reflect marriage in the light in which he, in his subconscious, really sees it.

Only in this way can J reconcile his deep-seated fear with his need to behave in an acceptable manner. His oblique choice of marriages portrayed in his writings—for all the world to read—is an acceptable way of articulating his deep-seated fear. Given the breadth of J's writings reflecting on marriage, one can only wonder how destructive his father was.

J also seems, in a comic sense, to utilise repression as another defence mechanism. In his writings, he inconsistently states at one point that his war wound was in his leg and at another point states that it is in his shoulder. My colleagues will recognise that this is common among soldiers and is often referred to in the psychoanalytic literature as 'war neuroses'. J has repressed the exact location of his wound in order to deal with the overall effects that his military experience had on him over the years. It is easy to see why his unconscious has forced him to do this. As a physician who was forced out of the war because he was a patient, J had suffered from the reversal of roles that is antithetical to his ego.

In sum, we are presented with the extraordinary—the remarkably jaundiced portrait of marriage that extends over several decades of published stories—and upon subjecting the author to basic psychoanalytic consideration, we find that the exceptional reveals itself as all too ordinary. J's marriage neurosis may be unique in literature. I am unaware of any other sustained commentary on the institution that depicts it so negatively over such a long period. But the underlying mechanisms that converted his childhood experiences into adult behaviour are well known, and their effects are commonplace. My therapeutic judgement was that J's age and social circumstances made him an unlikely candidate for depth analysis, but his writings have, perhaps, served in place of therapy for nearly fifty years. However unhappy his literary marriages may have been, J remains a contented individual.

EDITORIAL NOTES

1. The editors adding commentary on this article are indebted to the eminent psychologist Kenneth McQuage, BSI, who contributed to early conceptual discussions.
2. Consistent with such case studies published in professional literature, the identity of the subject of the study was, and is even today, usually kept

anonymous. Clearly, the “J” referred to in Andrews’s 1927 journal article is John H. Watson.

3. Freud’s analysis of Dostoevsky and patricide, though of obvious relevance to Andrews’s case study, was not published until 1928.
4. The editors are aware that, since Andrews’s article appeared, several such efforts have been attempted, but they have focused either on Holmes—a misplaced focus since with only few exceptions the detective himself does not write the accounts—or on Watson’s well-known literary agent, who is certainly too far removed from the writing of the tales to be analysed through them.
5. Andrews refers to the common psychoanalytic assumption that the stories we construct about ambiguous objects or stimuli are largely projections of aspects of our personalities, a principle that led to the later development of the Rorschach Test and the Thematic Apperception Test. For an example of this concept applied to canonical materials, see E. Butler Richards, “Musgrave Musings,” *Baker Street Miscellanea*, No. 17 (1979), pp. 16–19.
6. Andrews, writing for a technical audience in 1927, is using standard psychoanalytic language. The reference to “behavioural manifestations” is a technical psychoanalytic point that deep intrapsychic defense mechanisms generate motor activities that reduce tension. The reference to “hallucinatory representations of potentially gratifying objects” refers to the fact that objects of gratification (e.g., a father figure) are often represented (and remembered) in “hallucinatory” ways that exaggerate their positive features (e.g., the grand trappings of the King of Bohemia figure) or exaggerate their negative features (e.g., Dr. Grimesby Roylott.)
7. Andrews is, of course, doctrinaire in regarding defense mechanisms as having a purely intrapsychic reference, consistent with his time. Subsequent work, especially by Anna Freud, suggests that objective threats must receive a definition independent of instinctual drive representation and the super-ego, a view we believe is consistent with and implicit in Andrews’s analysis.
8. Here again, Anna Freud’s work, unavailable to Andrews in 1927, is highly relevant, and is consistent with Andrews’s basic premises. See her study *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*, London: Hogarth Press, 1937.