

Psychiatry and the media

Destruction in Cambridge and Hollywood

On the scent of analytical meanings behind a recent film

JENNIFER PEARCE, Registrar in Psychiatry and Psychotherapy, Harlow House, High Wycombe HP13 6AA

As part of winding-down from the Society for Psychotherapy Research's conference in Ravenscar and the Royal College of Psychiatrists' meeting in Cambridge on destruction, I went to see the award winning film *Scent of a Woman**. There was a synchronicity to this choice since in retrospect it seemed to me to reflect much of what was to be gained from the two conferences.

Al Pacino has received an Oscar for his performance as Colonel Frank Slade. He portrays a man blinded by his own arrogance and self-destructiveness. Externally he bears the scar of the mortar-shell which he allowed to take away his sight. We see him initially as a man embittered by his own failures, dependent on alcohol which he uses as a crutch to loosen his aggressive tongue and release his sexual drive. He becomes self-transformed into a suave city gentleman living out his fantasies. His crutch becomes threefold. There is the folding walking stick, a school-boy employed to 'mind' him over Thanksgiving weekend, and 'John' Daniels which he tells us he knows too well to call Jack.

We are taken from a mindless existence in a small American town to the fast and racy scene of New York. Colonel Slade has a plan of action in which he employs his reluctant and disbelieving young companion Charlie, as a way of lighting up his world. But there is a dark side, a shadow around Colonel Slade with which Charlie dares to tango.

Three scenes from the film stand out and could be used to parallel the work done in the recent psychotherapy conferences. The first is a moving and artistic encounter between Colonel Slade and an unknown attractive woman. Charlie and his charge initiate their intimacy through this woman's femininity. Colonel Slade seduces her from a distance by his intuitive knowledge of her scent. Charlie cannot dance but the older man engages in a sexual encounter with him through the medium of dance. She does not know the steps but is guided by her passion for the tango and her feelings of safety in

*The film is now available to rent on video.



Al Pacino in a scene from 'Scent of a Woman'. (Universal Pictures/CIC UK).

an older man. Charlie looks on admiringly at this externalisation of anima meeting with animus.

A highlight of the Ravenscar conference was a video recording of a psychotherapy session. Patient and therapist met in a 'dance', sometimes led by the therapist but mediated by the passions of the patient. The issue of sexuality within the therapeutic setting, both in a creative and destructive form, was looked at, both in the video recording and in other research projects. There was debate as to how the more

unconscious material within a therapeutic setting can be examined and measured. Key moments within encounters of individuals in groups are not always as explicit as key events, such as the dance in our film. Key events may carry deeper meaning and possibility: the possibility of a homosexual experience between our two male characters through the external encounter with the scent of a woman seems remote if all we measure is the external visible manifestations.

Charlie reaches manhood through an encounter with death and madness. Part of Colonel Slade's plot includes his own suicide, but he reckons without his young friend, for Charlie proves both to himself and to Colonel Slade that he can experience madness and the threat of annihilation, and survive. The young man and the old man wrestle for the gun. In doing so they achieve an intimacy which allows Colonel Slade to 'see again' and gives Charlie his freedom.

The subject of this year's Cambridge conference was destruction. Within the contained environment of Queen's College, Old Hall, psychotherapists tried to grasp the meaning of destruction. It was through a realisation of a need to experience both internal and external madness that some light came. The destruction of the health service formed the back-cloth to the experience. Child abuse, marital breakdown and destruction of society were considered. Rivalry, envy and anger gave way to communion within the body of the conference and a realisation of man's capacity to procreate and live within the ruins.

The final scene in the film takes place in Charlie's school where he is 'on trial' for failing to tell on his school friends. *In loco parentis* Colonel Slade restores Charlie's lost sense of identification with father and with Charlie's vindication is finally able to relinquish him back to his old life. There has been a change however; Charlie has come of age and Colonel Slade

has been able to move out of his pit of darkness, to live with his shadow because another could find beauty in his destructive madness. Of Klein's depressive position and Freud's view of the Oedipus complex, Meltzer has written, "It stands human values on its head looking backward at the relinquished object instead of forward to development and the possibility of an enriched object which the very relinquishment makes attainable". Keats' attempt was not to express "romantic agony" but to see death as "central to the experience of life and beauty" (Meltzer & Williams, 1988).

Juliet Mitchell gave her views on the Cambridge conference papers and distilled the essence of the process from destructiveness to creativity. The therapeutic task, she felt, was to facilitate the transformation of nostalgia into history. The role of women in all of this seemed an ephemeral idea which rose up now and again like the waft of scent. Their guilt and destructiveness when they failed to protect their children was felt by the conference. The film showed us the guilt of the women in Charlie's courtroom as they presided over the destructive impulses of the headmaster. And yet it seemed that what was being addressed was not a sex difference but the union of animus and anima within an individual. Colonel Slade and Charlie danced the dance of the feminine and masculine. The task of the conferences was to bear both destructiveness and creativity; not to dwell in nostalgic ruins but to make history – and move on.

Reference

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A new look at *Asylum*

J. H. M. CRICHTON, Nightingale Scholar and Honorary Registrar in Psychiatry,
University of Cambridge Institute of Criminology, Cambridge CB3 9DT

The 1970s horror film *Asylum** is new out on the video store shelves. On the cover, above a severed head wrapped in brown paper, it warns, "you'll find more than cuckoos in this nest". This anthology of popular perceptions of madness and mad-doctors

**Asylum* 1993 VIPCO videos. Director R. Ward Baker. Screenplay by Robert Bloch.

was made some time ago and presents familiar stereotypes of mental illness. That it has been released on video now, in the wake of the Ashworth Inquiry and public concern over the mentally ill suggests that such stereotypes are enduring.

Robert Powell stars as an idealistic young psychiatrist, Dr Martin, who drives up through the storm to a dark imposing building, Dunsmoor