

# When Two Worlds Collide

## *An account of a student's experience in bringing together psychodrama theory and literary criticism*

by Linda Aitkin

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### Background

This paper acts as a record and celebration of the beginnings of my work in developing a "psychodramatic" approach to literature as it was applied to the writing of John Milton, Jane Austen, Henry Lawson, and the collected work of a number of Australian women poets. In it I hope to convey the richness and excitement of this time of learning and to demonstrate the value of thoughtful application of the theory and skills of psychodrama beyond the therapeutic context.

The story began on a cold July morning as I walked up the hill from the residential Colleges on the campus of the University of New England to the Arts building, puzzling over my response to a difficult compulsory essay question. I strained to imagine what an acceptable answer might be, and, with a sinking heart, wondered how I could force

myself to pull it together by the deadline. It seemed that to write this essay I would need to go against myself in order to satisfy the expectations of others. The contrast was painful as I compared the feeling of wholeness associated with my role as a psychodrama student with the despair and splitness I experienced as a university student.

As the walking track became steeper I stopped to catch my breath. There had to be an alternative. I wondered what would happen if I approached my university work in the role of psychodrama trainee. At this moment my two worlds, or perhaps two selves, collided. It was the beginning of a rewarding eighteen month period during which the principles and theories which I had learned through psychodrama training were applied in my role as a student of literature.

## Explaining God in *Paradise Lost*

So without least impulse or shadow  
of fate,  
Or aught by me immutably foreseen,  
They trespass, authors to themselves  
in all  
Both what they judge and what they  
choose; for so  
I formed them free, and free they  
must remain,  
Till they enthrall themselves: I else  
must change  
Their nature, and revoke the high  
decree  
Unchangeable, eternal, which  
ordained  
Their freedom, they themselves  
ordained their fall.

*Paradise Lost Book III, 120-128*

*Place this passage in the context of Paradise Lost and use it as the basis for a discussion of the role and character of God in the poem and the themes of free-will and predestination.*

It was the task of explaining the role of God in *Paradise Lost* which challenged me to reconsider my approach to learning. I felt alienated by the theological nature of the essay question and trapped because it was compulsory. I was unwilling to compromise my integrity and proceed with this task as a chore. As a psychodrama student my teachers had encouraged me to value my own experience and listen to my responses. As a university student I had previously been successful by producing answers which were acceptable, but lacking in originality. Rather than trying to find a “right” answer, I allowed myself to respond to the question directly, from my own reading of the text, and began to come alive to the question. What do I

see? What do I think? If I wrote what I really thought, what would that be?

I accepted the text as a story and God as its protagonist. Using my knowledge of role theory I began my response to the question with a detailed discussion of the character of God the creator, God the judge, and God the almighty king. In my consideration of the complex concepts of free-will and predestination I made use of my ability to “make pictures”, to conceptualise events in terms of time and space. This led me to visualise the difficulty of establishing a relationship between God and man:

The complicating factor in the drama is God's unique character ... As a character in a drama God is set apart from the other characters by his omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience. Milton's task is to depict the relationship between humans bound by time, place and limited knowledge and a being who is simultaneously in all places, in time and place, and possesses infinite power and knowledge.

This observation was followed by a detailed analysis of God's plan to create beings who were free to choose to worship him, and although not overtly stated, the influence of psychodrama training was evident in my expression:

... The divine creator has created Adam and Eve in his own image, with the capacity to determine their own destinies. As “authors to themselves in all” they become self creators.

This thinking was developed further in the conclusion:

... The challenge thrown out by *Paradise Lost* is applicable regardless of personal beliefs. Once we step out of the role of reader and

reinstates our right to disbelieve, whether we chose to acknowledge it or not, we are all faced with the responsibilities accompanying personal freedom. If the future is not determined, we, like Adam and Eve, must act as the authors of our own stories.

## Educating Emma

*As Emma's education advances, she becomes less and less the isolated great lady and more and more a member of the community. She moves from her private world of romantic fantasy, into the world of actuality. Discuss.*

Since the question was written in the language of a role theorist, I took this as an opportunity to explore the character development of Emma using role theory and Moreno's theory of child development:

Moreno defined a role as "the actual and tangible forms which the self takes".<sup>1</sup> He says "We thus define a role as the functioning form the individual assumes in the specific moment he reacts to a specific situation in which other persons or objects are involved".<sup>2</sup>

The family of origin, known as the original social atom, is the source of the first roles to be developed in the cultural atom, "the range of roles and counter roles which exist in a person's repertoire".<sup>3</sup> Emma's original social atom is beautifully mapped out in the drawing scene. Her brief description of the small range of subjects on

which she could practice her drawing skills captures the essence of the members in her family unit; the nervous father, the compliant governess and the indulgent sister.

Viewing the description of Emma as the *isolated great lady* as an attempt to define one of Emma's psychodramatic roles, roles which express the psychological dimensions of the self, leads us to examine the specific situation in which the role occurs and the persons or objects which elicit this manner of functioning.

The fairytale quality of the role of *fair mistress of the mansion* is contrasted with Emma's restricted home life in which she fulfills her obligations as companion and hostess for her father. Mr Woodhouse is viewed as an inadequate mirror for the development of important adult roles in his daughter:

Unable to exercise critical judgement he has created and fed the illusion of perfection in his youngest daughter and in employing Miss Taylor, a governess incapable of contradicting or opposing her charge, he ensured that Emma's inflated opinion of herself would meet no opposition.

Following a brief outline of the stages of development of the double, the mirror, and role reversal, an assessment of Emma's father's roles is provided:

He functions at ... the stage of the double, in which the child has not drawn a distinction between itself and other. Like a young child he is

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1. J. Fox (ed.) *The Essential Moreno*, New York, 1987, p.62.

2. Ibid.

3. L. Clayton, "The Use of the Cultural Atom to Record Personality Change in Individual Psychotherapy", in *Journal of Group Psychotherapy, Psychodrama and Sociometry*, 1982, 35, p.112.

unable to distinguish between his own thoughts and feelings and the thoughts and feelings of others.

Mr Woodhouse views marriage as an unhappy and regrettable state and attempts to dissuade Emma from considering marriage for herself. The role of *isolated great lady* emerges in this context as Emma exhibits an inflated view of the importance of her social role, and a rich fantasy life in the role of the *speculating imaginalist* who can predict and promote matches for other people.

Emma attempts to resist mirroring in the form of advice and warnings from those who are disturbed by her interfering behaviour until she is confronted with the results of her poor judgement by an embarrassing and unexpected proposal of marriage. Role development occurs when she is challenged to consider the effect of a cutting remark which is deemed unworthy of her by the much respected Mr Knightley. This development is presented as the emergence of an ability to reverse roles:

After confronting and owning the image displayed in the mirror ... Emma is able to act from the stage of recognition of the other. In her subsequent visit to Miss Bates Emma finds herself in a new role in which her will to act and her sense of what is right are merged.

The development of the ability to confront unflattering mirroring and reverse roles with others who are affected by her behaviour have released Emma from her isolation and enabled her to function as a conscious and responsive member of the community.

## A Systems Approach to Henry Lawson

*'Lawson's perspective on Australian male behaviour and bush life is more critical than complimentary.'*  
Discuss.

This question immediately conjured forth an image of my Year 12 Economics teacher, Mr Shane, a man committed to teaching, with a tremendous enthusiasm for economics, and a sure-fire method for answering exam questions.

Divide your piece of paper in half with a vertical line. Write "critical" on one half, "complimentary" on the other. Next, divide the page in half again, with a horizontal line across the middle. In the left margin write "male behavior" beside the top section, and "bush life" beside the lower section. Read a large sample of stories, making notes on each in the appropriate quadrants; critical of male behaviour, complimentary towards male behaviour, critical of bush life, complimentary towards bush life. If the sample size is sufficient to be convincing, all that remains is to observe the quantity of notes in each quadrant, and report one's conclusions, refuting, supporting, or agreeing in part with the opening premise you have been asked to consider.

The Lawson question was very irritating. At one time I would have swallowed this irritation and produced an adequate argument along the lines of Mr Shane's ideal essay plan. Remembering my commitment to present creative and genuine responses in my written work, I sought a different solution, beginning by working with my initial response, valuing the subjective rather than rejecting it. Why did I hate the question? What was I reacting to?

My objections centred on the aspect of the question which made it so amenable to Mr Shane's system; its quantitative nature, which focused on two opposing tendencies, the tendency to be critical or complimentary, as conveyed through the role of judge. In addition, in my reading of the stories I had not considered the role of judge to be a significant role of the author. In order to respond it was necessary to address the structure and world view of the question itself.

Having identified the source of my discomfort I sought an approach to Lawson's work which conveyed the richness of his role as writer and observer of life. Responding to the qualitative elements in his writing, I drew upon my psychodrama training and began to visualise how I perceived Lawson's approach to his themes:

The visual image of a writer's work as a painter's canvas creates a view of writing as a system in which vivid expressions of many dimensions of life can coexist ... The bush setting is the context in which characters live and move, like a painting come to life, interacting and changing during the course of a story ... The pictures presented in his stories reveal a rich tapestry of life exploring the many solutions, destructive or life enhancing, with which people respond to the universal dilemmas of living. This model of his work could be represented pictorially as a number of circles, each representing a different story, spread around a page. Lines could be drawn to connect common themes between stories forming a complex web of linkages.

The essay continued by exploring a number of common themes related to bush life and the experiences of men

and women which occur throughout his work. A presentation of a variety of responses to hardship, such as isolation and madness, was followed by a discussion of numerous representations of genuineness, fun,

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and love of life and examples of characters who portray both human strengths and frailties. Themes are presented as "connections" and "common threads" which may run through a number of stories, and the tendency to attribute Lawson with the role of judge is challenged:

A systems approach allows the stories to be conceived of as a representation of life which focuses on the relationships between people and events without the need to lay blame, a view more in keeping with the nature of the stories which exhibit an awareness of the association between the behaviour of characters and their environment. By exploring the effect of circumstances on behaviour Lawson

is able to write with a genuine understanding of the difficulties and choices people face.

The conclusion of the essay suggests that the value of a systems approach is in drawing the reader's attention to a broader range of the qualitative aspects of a piece of writing:

Lawson uses the bush setting and bush characters to write about what it is to make a living, to marry and raise children. In this context he reveals that some people are able to meet the challenges of life while others are destroyed by it. Viewing his writing as a picture of the life he has observed, a representation of the many interconnected images and meanings which form his perception of how the world is, it is possible to be affected by the many moods in his work and produce a personal, rather than a critical response. The purpose of the systems approach is to view the writer as a portrayer rather than a judge of life in order to enable an exploration of the world from his perspective. Rather than focussing on the author's motivations and personal conclusions, this approach encourages the reader to see what is presented and respond to it.

## Feminism and Spontaneity

*"In Australian women's poetry traditional centres and oppositions are displaced." Discuss with reference to the verse in the Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets.*

The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets was compiled from a feminist perspective with the intention of challenging tradition in Australian publishing. Its editors viewed it as "a part of the history of women's writing and of a cultural politics which are creatively disturbing the conventional view of our literary heritage."<sup>4</sup> The collection is based on the view that women's writing has to a large extent been excluded from mainstream publishing:

Women have marginal status in the literary world, otherwise this book would not be necessary. Having to reconstruct the world means rethinking. The power of the margins is exactly in the reconstruction. There is a way of understanding the centre from the margins.<sup>5</sup>

The philosophy behind the collection is strongly influenced by post structuralist thinking which presents the view that the world has traditionally been seen in terms of "binary oppositions" in which one term is favoured above the other.<sup>6</sup> Post-structuralism suggests that "certain meanings are elevated by social ideologies to a privileged position, or made the centres around which other meanings are forced to turn."<sup>7</sup> From the feminist perspective, men have traditionally held the central position while women have been relegated to the margins.

The essay describes how the collection attempts to redress this imbalance, primarily through providing the opportunity to hear the

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4. S.Hampton and K.Llewellyn (eds.) *The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets*, Ringwood, 1986, p.1.

5. *Ibid.*, p.2.

6. T.Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Oxford, 1983, p.131.

7. *Ibid.*

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voices of women from many ages and ethnic backgrounds, including material which presents women as subjects from their own point of view, exploring gender relations, experimenting with new forms of writing, and rewriting traditional themes from a woman's perspective. The book was successful in making women's poetry available in mainstream bookstores and in school and university reading lists.

While recognising the achievements of the collection I

expressed some concerns about its ideological approach:

Acting as a metaphor for the women's movement, the collection successfully employs collective action to bring women's work into focus and, like the women's movement, its very existence serves to highlight and intensify gender based oppositions, drawing attention to women's similarities with each other and their differences from men. It sets women's experience apart from that of men and tends to encourage the consideration of women poets en masse, possibly at the expense of their individuality.

It is suggested that this represents an inversion of the traditional opposition by attempting to place women at the centre and men at the margins. This observation is assessed in the light of Moreno's theory of spontaneity:

If considered in the light of J. L. Moreno's definition of spontaneity as "the adequate response to a new situation, or the novel response to an old situation",<sup>8</sup> *The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets* is a spontaneous response on the part of the poets, editors and publisher to the observation that publication of women's poetry in Australia was limited both in quantity and scope. It is nevertheless useful to consider Moreno's suggestion that we tend to hold on to the solutions provided by spontaneous acts, to the detriment of our ability to respond adequately to new situations and that 'cultural conserves' are produced when original solutions become as entrenched as the problem they attempted to overcome.

If women's writing were to

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8. Eagleton, p.132.

continue to be presented in a collected form, if it were to remain angry to the exclusion of other forms of expression, if it were to refuse any exchange of ideas with contemporary male writers, then the achievements of the book would have become conserved. In order to continue to act with spontaneity women must be prepared to come up with new responses as conditions change. If collective action is effective, then the relationship between men and women will have been affected. Moreno suggests that in order to change a relationship, both parties must participate. An adequate dialogue is not possible if men are persistently relegated to a marginal position in feminist thinking. A movement called "feminism" may be effective in rocking the foundation of conservatism, but a new, non-gender bound perspective will be necessary in order to begin to reconstruct the relationship between men and women and prevent the concern with gender difference from becoming conserved.

The way in which this new perspective might develop draws on a systems perspective using a similar analogy to that developed in the Lawson essay:

The basis for such a new perspective lies in the observation informing deconstruction that text is not linear, but a "web-like complexity of signs".<sup>9</sup> Rather than adopting the view that this complexity is problematic, it is possible to employ this picture of the nature of life and language to break the cycle of inversions now occurring with regard to the male/female opposition. It

enables us to conceive of each individual as a member of an infinite number of subgroups.

The paper concludes by suggesting that an exclusive focus on gender issues as the primary source of all difference acts as a distraction. It asserts that an acknowledgement of the complexity of human relationships opens the way for new perceptions of the world which incorporate women and men.

### **Towards a Psychodramatic Approach to Literature**

As these four essays emerged I began to see the possibility of developing a psychodramatic approach as an alternative or an addition to the existing range of approaches to literature taught at university. I had successfully applied this approach at the level of process and content to inform how I went about responding to an essay question as well as incorporating it in the content of my responses. This created a dynamic relationship between me as reader, and the text, in which the principles applied in my own life were also applied in responding to a piece of writing. It also made me aware of the possibilities of applying the learning from my reading and analysis of texts in my own life.

My work was informed by an awareness of the possibility of restrictive and creative solutions being established within a question, a text, and in my response to it. Awareness of the theory of creativity, spontaneity and cultural conserves, made me more open to these

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9. Ibid.



elements in a text and in my writing. Role theory provided a means by which I could assess my own functioning as a reader and writer, and the functioning of the characters depicted. By valuing and exploring my subjective responses as a reader I developed an approach to essay writing which was integrative, rather than fragmenting. It led to a fuller learning experience as I responded from all the elements of the role of reader, involving what I thought and felt, and how I acted.

Adopting this approach meant taking a risk, setting aside an old belief that students had to write what markers wanted to hear and that creative thought would be rejected. My experiment showed that in this context, original ideas were valued. The essays were well received by teaching staff and the openness of the markers' responses to the use of role theory was heartening. Unlike Mr Woodhouse, my tutors provided an adequate mirror which encouraged me to take creative risks in my future work.