

LEE HARVEY OSWALD:
AN ADLERIAN INTERPRETATION^{1 2}

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This paper is essentially an Adlerian reply to the brief interpretation of the case of Lee Harvey Oswald by Joseph Katz (5). We shall accept, as did Katz, that Oswald indeed assassinated President Kennedy.

Katz starts by making some observations to the importance of which we can agree. He notes that Oswald was the youngest and probably the most indulged son, and that his mother was vain and self-centered. At the time of the assassination she was estranged from her entire family, yet she seemed "to bask in the light of the nefarious publicity which has been heaped upon her." And in her vociferously loyal defense of her son she actually protests "that she did nothing terrible in bringing up her son."

But our way parts from that of Katz when he makes his main point in what he calls "speculation on Oswald's unconscious." We quote:

The speculation is therefore made that in Kennedy, Oswald saw his mother and had to rid himself finally of her . . . Oswald's period of disturbed, disorganized behavior for the past few years shows his desperate attempts to shake his mother by renouncing his country, fleeing to Russia, and marrying a Russian woman . . . [However,] the final question remains: if Oswald really wanted to kill his mother, why did he not do so? Why did he kill President Kennedy instead? To kill his mother was to commit symbolically the very act which all his energies were directed in denying; namely that he had sexually violated her in his youth . . . To kill his mother was too much akin to penetrating her sexually . . . President Kennedy thereby became the substitute target for the outlet of all of Oswald's pent-up fury and libido, meant really for his mother (5, pp. 123-124).

In the Adlerian interpretation, which is offered below, Oswald's mother is also considered to be of central importance, but not as a libidinal object. Whereas Katz views the situation in terms of

¹Reprinted from the *Psychoanalytic Review*, 1966, 53(3), 55-66, through the courtesy of the authors, the editors and the publisher, the National Psychological Association for Psychoanalysis, Inc., New York, N. Y. This applies also to the Reply by Joseph Katz, reprinted from the same issue, pp. 66-68.

²The general information used here has been taken from *Life*, Feb. 21, 1964, pp. 68a-80; *New York Times*, December 4, 1963, p. 18; Dec 8, 1963, p. 45; Dec. 10, 1963, p. 31; Nov. 24, 1964, p. 33; and *Time*, Nov. 29, 1963, p. 27. All these sources are from soon after the deed, and the paper was completed in the summer of 1965.

Freudian dynamics, particularly the Oedipus complex, the Adlerian perspective emphasizes the key role the mother must play in preparing her child for a life of cooperation and contribution. Her importance for the child is how she does or does not fulfill her function. According to Adler, "The mother must give the child his first experience of a trustworthy fellow being; and she must then be prepared to spread this trust and friendship until it includes the whole of our human society" (1, p. 373). With regard to crime specifically Adler says:

It is easy to see that in unhappy or broken marriages the cooperative spirit is not being properly developed . . . [Later, the criminal] does not know there is social interest in the world, having never experienced it. He has a hostile attitude toward other people; his look is hostile and he regards everybody as an enemy; he has never been able to find appreciation (1, pp. 418-419).

The task of the Adlerian interpretation is to show how, starting life with a mother who did not develop in her child trust, friendship, and social interest, Lee Harvey Oswald developed a faulty life style which makes his crime quite understandable.³

NEGLECT AND INFERIORITY FEELING

What parental guidance Lee received had to come from his mother, as his father had died two months before his birth. Lee was born on October 18, 1939, in New Orleans. There was an older brother of five, and a step-brother of seven by the mother's previous marriage. Apparently Mrs. Oswald stayed at home with her children the first two years of Lee's life, but then went to work as a saleswoman, and placed the two older boys in a Lutheran home for children. When Lee was three, he also was placed there. During the year he was home alone Mrs. Oswald had to leave him much of the time in the care of others. Two years later, his mother married for a third time and Lee was taken out of the "home" to relocate again in unfamiliar surroundings. All too soon his newly acquired step-father and mother were heading for a divorce which was granted in 1948, four years after their marriage. This constant neglect, turmoil, and instability

³Since this paper was written the very informative account of the Oswald case by Thornley has come to our attention. It includes an introduction by Albert Ellis who arrives at an interpretation similar to the one presented here in a number of points, as, altogether there is a considerable area of agreement between his Rational Psychotherapy and Adler's Individual Psychology. Ellis speaks of Oswald's grandiosity and considers it "to some degree the other side of the coin of his underlying feelings of weakness, and . . . partially a defense against these feelings" (3, p. 11).

in his early years provided the background for the development of a faulty style of life based on little, if any, experience or example of good interpersonal relations or social interest. Certainly it can be stated that Lee's mother never, especially during the crucial formative years, gave him a bedrock of security, of regularity, or of order; more importantly, she neglected to give him "the completest possible experience of human fellowship, and then to widen it into a life attitude towards others" (1, p. 372).

However, this neglect did not impel Lee to develop the particular style of life he assumed. "It is not the child's experiences which dictate his actions; it is the conclusions which he draws from his experiences" (1, p. 209). Lee created for himself a hostile style of life which gave a mistaken meaning to all aspects of living. Another child placed in the same circumstances may not have done so, as was the case with his step-brothers who apparently developed normally. Lee's interpretation emphasized the negative side of existence. For him the world was hostile, and unworthy of trust. Men were not fellow beings with whom one can cooperate and strive together to solve the problems of everyday living; but rather, they were his enemies who must be forced into recognizing Lee Harvey Oswald.

Every person at times has feelings of inferiority. If, however, the individual comes from a sphere of insecurity and neglect, then it is quite likely that his feelings of inferiority will be more acute. This logic follows quite naturally, if one considers that the neglected child does not have the chance to appreciate the fact that it is through cooperation that a person's life problems can be solved. With no example to demonstrate this principle, a child could conclude that he is alone and helpless to struggle with the problems confronting him.

In Lee's case there was an accumulation of factors conducive to the development of increased inferiority feelings. He was of slight build. He had no father, and had a step-father for only a short time. The innumerable changes of home, school, and neighborhood constantly put him at the disadvantage of being a newcomer and outsider. Lee also suffered from an impairment of his hearing, when he had to have a mastoid operation. He was left alone a lot. His fourth-grade teacher said: "Lee left an empty home in the morning, went home to an empty home for lunch, and returned to an empty home at night." Most probably he also felt the pinch of economic inferiority: "I saw my mother as a worker, always with less than we could use."

Greater inferiority feelings in themselves are likely to make for greater self-centeredness and to impair social interest. In the case of Lee such a development had been facilitated by his mother failing to provide training in a positive attitude toward human relations and cooperation. Lee's resulting lack of social interest becomes evident throughout his life. One manifestation of this was his lack of readiness for contacts; he never seemed to enjoy the company of others for its own sake, as one would in engaging in friendly conversations, or in attending a squadron party (when he was in the marines). When friends gave gifts for his baby, he could not accept them, as he was incapable of joining in any give and take; he impugned the friends' motives as humiliating charity, apparently being unable to see how others could get positive pleasure in giving and sharing.

PAMPERED LIFE STYLE

Adler pointed out three situations likely to be overburdening to the child, which would lead to poor opinions of himself and of the world, and predispose to a neurotic, self-centered life style. These were: being neglected or unwanted, being pampered, and having organ inferiorities. Viewing the situation objectively, Mrs. Oswald certainly neglected Lee as shown above. However, it is also sure that she pampered him, at least in the sense that she let him have his own way and excused him from responsibility for his actions. Whenever Lee came into conflict with others, or with law and order, she consistently released him from any obligation to comply with what was expected of him; denied any wrong on his part, and/or placed the blame for his behavior squarely on others. When he was a youngster she took his word against that of an adult complaining about his holding up the phone and using profanity on their party line. She once condoned his truancy by saying, "He used to come home and say, 'I already know all the stuff they're teaching. Why bother with that?' Then he'd go off to the library." When he was investigated by the Children's Court of New York City, at 13, Mrs. Oswald refused to take him to a psychiatric clinic, as recommended; she kept saying he wasn't any problem, and she didn't understand what the fuss was all about. She told the probation officer: "My son is not going to report to you . . . He's given his word that it is not going to happen again. I was not going to have a boy of that age and caliber going to a probation officer." Much later, when he couldn't find a job she claimed it was all because the papers had blown up the matter of his

defection. And last of all, she placed the blame for his final deed on the security officers who had not held her son under complete surveillance!

One can see how this attitude would lead Lee to regard himself as always right, or at least having special privileges, whereas the others were wrong and to blame. He was different, deserving of something better. It was Lee Oswald against the others.

After his death, his wife said of him: "I always tried to point out to him that he was a man like any others who were around us. But he simply could not understand that."

Thus, rules were for the others, not for him. When, at 16, he turned out for football, he refused to sprint with the other boys, as was required after practice. He said that this was a free country and he didn't have to run if he didn't want to—though this cost him his chance to play.

Lee was the youngest child in a family of three, with two older step-brothers, although from his sixth year on he was in effect the "only" child. The effect of birth order has always been stressed by Adlerians, and Adler proposed, "The second largest proportion of problem children comes from among the youngest, because all the family spoils them . . . Sometimes a youngest child . . . wishes to excel in everything, be unlimited and unique" (1, p. 381). This, as we have seen, would certainly apply to Oswald.

In summary, one may say that, although neglected, Lee also grew up in a situation which was at least to some extent pampering. In any event, he had acquired a pampered life style, meaning that he considered himself entitled to special privileges and not bound to rules by which others must abide, and that he expected to receive without feeling any obligation to contribute on his part.

WITHDRAWAL, DEFIANCE AND POWER STRIVING

School was not a particularly pleasant encounter for Lee. Throughout elementary school in Fort Worth, he was described as a child of average intelligence and low achievement. He did not enter school until he was seven, which may account for the fact that he was taller than his classmates. At first he showed some leadership and popularity, though often through attention-getting tricks and rough-tough behavior. He was a very lively, wiggly boy, always on the move, indicating a high degree of activity. Yet he was unwilling to join in games. Such high activity level and low degree of social

interest portend, according to Adler, the development of criminal tendencies.

In 1952, his mother and Lee moved to New York City to be near his step-brother. The picture of Lee at school now changed in that he was said to be shorter than his classmates and often taunted because of his Southern drawl and because he wore blue-jeans. On a questionnaire Lee completed, he could not list a single close friend. One of his teachers thought him to be a belligerent, hostile boy who would lash out at anyone who offended him. Throughout school, there is the recurring theme of the boy being alone, and hints of his hostile feelings. Later, in the Marines, he is said to have been a hot-head but that he could not hold his own in fist fights, possibly because of his small stature.

Serious problems became evident to everybody except his mother, who was away from home working while Lee played hooky for 47 days out of four months. His probation officer noted at the time that Lee spent much of his day alone, watching television. Neighbors stated that he played alone, quite often with toy guns. Lee's mother had to appear in court with him. He was sent to the Youth House for Boys in the Bronx for a month. There a psychiatric examination disclosed that he had fantasies involving violence.

Apparently he safeguarded himself from the new school situation by "excluding" others still further and increasingly "seeking distance," behaviors which Adler saw as characteristic of the neurotic. Lee sought the "dream world" of television where he would be unopposed and could identify with those who came out on top.

On the questionnaire mentioned above, he gave his favorite pastimes as reading and football—the former where he could be alone, in his dream world, and the latter, where he could "fight" and win victories. Yet even in connection with football he was not willing to do what was expected of him, as we have seen.

Throughout his life he had an interest in guns. In junior high school he asked another boy whether his toy pistol looked real, and when the boy replied that it did not, Lee said he could get a real one from a pawn shop but would have to steal it. While he was in the Marine Corps he was court-martialed for failing to register a personal weapon, a pistol. One of the few fields into which Oswald put real effort was marksmanship, and he became a fairly good shot with a rifle in the Marines. We may assume that for him a gun was the means to be above others, to gain superiority by absolute power over others.

MARXISM

While at high school in New Orleans, Oswald started reading Marx, an experience which he described as "like a very religious person opening the Bible for the first time." In studying Marx, he stated, he was searching for a key to his environment. This remark indicates that to him, with his pampered life style, and unable to relate himself to others on an equal footing, life was an insoluble puzzle.

The concepts expressed by Marx, though essentially belonging to sociology, have much relevance to a man who is struggling with his relation to society. Erich Fromm (4) stresses the humanistic ideas which can be gleaned from the early writings of the philosopher-economist. However, in all probability, Oswald read and grasped primarily the deterministic, materialistic side of Marx, as these concepts are far better known and could more easily explain to Oswald the enigmas and disappointments of his life.

Where Marx wrote of the exploitation of the proletariat by capitalism, Oswald could see himself being used by a society which did not want him. While he could not see that his lack of satisfactions could possibly come from his own non-contributing, he accepted that this lack must be the fault of others, the society which was exploiting him. Thus Marx gave a larger meaning to Oswald's own rebellious feelings. The overthrow of capitalistic societies as espoused by Marxist Russia and China probably found Oswald very receptive and captivated his imagination.

Apparently he saw in Marx—as later in Russia—a utopia for himself, a personal "goal of perfection." In Marx's writings he found a way in which he could strive to be better than, or superior to, his fellowmen. The particular concretized manner by which he could act was also prescribed by Marx—revolution.

Thus Oswald's plan to go to Russia developed. It was in this connection that he directed his efforts to a genuine accomplishment—perhaps his only one besides marksmanship. This was teaching himself Russian while in the Marines. He failed the qualifying test for military language school, but this did not deter him. He studied all on his own—and very successfully. He read a Russian newspaper for which he sent, along with serious books on history and government. By the time he got to Russia he was said to speak the language fluently, if not grammatically. Even after returning to the United States, he insisted on speaking Russian at home.

GRANDIOSITY

In each mind there is the conception of a goal or ideal to get beyond the present state and to overcome the present deficiencies and difficulties by postulating a concrete goal for the future. By means of this concrete goal, the individual can think and feel himself superior to the difficulties of the present because he has in his mind his success of the future (1, pp. 99-100).

Oswald's goal was to be superior to everyone. One way of striving toward this goal was to depreciate those who were actually his superiors. As a marine, his second court-martial was for using provocative words toward an officer. A former officer recalled Oswald as a trouble-maker and officer-baiter; he enjoyed stumping an officer with a question about some obscure situation, just to show off his own superior knowledge.

Another way of striving for superiority was to break further away from reality in boosting his self-esteem with a sham of self-importance and grandiosity. He set himself unrealistically high goals: he got himself admitted to a small institution for higher learning in Switzerland and considered becoming a writer. After returning from Russia, he planned a book criticizing Soviet life. When he made the statement in Russia that he was defecting from his native land, he was interviewed, had his picture taken, and was given the opportunity for the first time in his life to feel important. He liked to talk big. His letter to the Secretary of the Navy, complaining of his dishonorable discharge, was written in the grand, superior style: "I shall employ all means to right this gross mistake."

His wife said, after the assassination: "He wanted in any way, whether good or bad, to do something that would make him outstanding, that he would be known in history . . . He had a 'sick imagination.' He engaged in fantasies about his future greatness, such as predicting that in 20 years he would be 'prime minister.' " After his arrest he said he knew his rights, he could handle the matter himself: he, Lee Oswald, against the whole country was big enough to handle this thing alone.

Adler has pointed out, "when a person seeks to concretize his goal by wanting to domineer over others . . . No one could posit such a goal for himself without being forced to come into conflict with the coercion of evolution, to violate reality" (1, p. 108). This conflict with social reality was consistently demonstrated in Oswald's life. Its greatest irony came when, having come to Moscow, he was refused citizenship. He must have felt extremely disappointed that the epitome of his aspirations was thus denied him. Even if Russia had

accepted him, however, we can assume that Oswald would not have been all right, but rather would have pursued his goal of grandiosity. For, according to Adler, social interest is the criterion for normality, and Oswald, as we have seen had no real social interest. While his application for Russian citizenship was still pending, an American reporter in Moscow, at the time, appropriately commented, "He (Oswald) talked in terms of capitalists and exploiters . . . But I did not perceive what the essential thing was . . . that this guy would be unhappy anywhere." He did in fact become as little satisfied in Russia as he had been in school and in the Marines.

THE EXOGENOUS FACTOR

Adler saw life as the meeting of three tasks: the relationship to other people, work, and love-and-marriage. Oswald had failed in all three. Looking down on people, being unfriendly and aloof, he felt himself above society, and not a part of it. His wife said of him: "Everybody hated him, even in Russia." After his return to the United States, everyone who became acquainted with him eventually rejected him because of his unmannerly, hostile, rigidly opinionated ways.

As for work, he never held a job for any length of time, and the work he tried was relatively unskilled.

Regarding marriage, he married an attractive Russian pharmacist whom he had met while a sheet-metal worker in a factory in Minsk and whom he brought with him to the United States. But the marriage had come close to the breaking point, marked by inordinate demands of Oswald and callous indifference to his wife and children. One time he refused to pay the hospital bill for his young child who had been taken there in an emergency by friends; and he would not enable his wife to get the dental care she needed. At times he beat her.

As he found himself increasingly checkmated, he bought himself a rifle, in the spring of 1963. As it had been in the past, the possession of a gun was still his stake in greatness, giving him power over life and death. He directed his wife to take a photograph of him, holding in one hand a Trotskyite newspaper in front of his chest, in the other hand his rifle, and a pistol in his hip-pocket. It was truly a portrait of a triumphant, conquering revolutionary. It was as though he posed this picture the way he wanted to be remembered.

That summer in New Orleans he had borrowed from the library

numerous books on current affairs, including one on the assassination of Huey Long and a biography of President Kennedy.

He offered to work with an anti-Castro Cuban exile group, but was rejected. He then distributed pro-Castro leaflets, got into a fight with the anti-Castroites, and was fined for disturbing the peace. Cornered, and up against it, he saw no other way out than to apply again for a visa to Russia, traveling to Mexico in the attempt. When this was not granted, no way seemed open. He became more secretive and isolated; he hid behind an assumed name.

In this situation he took actual recourse to his new rifle: He told his wife that he shot at General Walker.

And then came the great opportunity for him to perform a deed that would make his name known the world over and in history. And it was an opportunity to use his cherished rifle and one of the real skills he had mastered. It was an incredible coincidence that the route of the President led past Oswald's new job location.

Accepting the account of events as published in the newspapers and magazines, there could have been no possibility of any long-term plan on Oswald's part to kill President Kennedy. Oswald got his job at the Texas School Book Depository through the suggestion of a neighbor of the friend with whom his wife and child were staying. This was in the middle of October, 1963. But it was not until November 19 that the Dallas papers announced that the President's motorcade would pass directly by the Book Depository, and not until the next day, two days before the event, that they gave the time—the middle of Oswald's lunch hour! Knowing of his complete lack of social ties—the absence of any national allegiance, his friendlessness, his indifference even to his wife and children—we can understand that in his desperate situation this opportunity was a truly irresistible temptation.

CONCLUDING CONSIDERATION

The Freudian approach as exemplified by Katz selects but a small part of the actual life events and uses these for lavish inferences from the theory, in order to illuminate not the rest of the life of the person, but that which is presumably behind it all, an assumed unconscious. This unconscious is not concerned with the real, present, new, life problems of the individual, but with some other assumed problems carried over from infancy. Actual present behavior, when it is taken into account, is not accepted as a sample which could become in-

creasingly meaningful if understood in its larger context, but as a symbolic action which, again, derives its significance not from anything out in the open, but from something assumed and hidden.

The Adlerian approach, on the other hand, is concerned with a life as it is actually lived and every detail of it, including the goals and aspirations of a person. In the year before his last, Adler wrote: "The field of investigation of Individual Psychology is the relationship, carried out in actions, of a peculiarly stylized individual to problems of the environment" (2, p. 244).

The reader may ask, what have we added to the existing newspaper and magazine accounts? Where have we gone beyond common knowledge, common sense? We should answer that we have drawn from a theory which makes inferences only sparingly and close to actual behavior. We have employed the concepts of striving for superiority, striving for personal power, social interest and its lack, overburdening environmental factors, birth-order position, the determining role of the individual's interpretation of his experiences, inferiority feelings and self-centeredness, the pampering situation and the pampered life style, predisposition and the exogenous factor, and others which may not necessarily have become explicit. Theory was invoked only to establish a larger context for the reported facts and thus to show them in a fuller significance, to facilitate fitting all the various, partly incomprehensible and sometimes apparently contradictory actions into a meaningful whole. Such organization of the data so as to enable one to discern the individual's self-consistent and unique life style, is also the contribution of the theory. If the outcome is so readily acceptable this perhaps finds its explanation in these words from Robert W. White: "Adler's ideas have gone into the stream of contemporary thought and have become the accepted clinical common sense of our time" (6, p. 4).

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REPLY

There are those who would declare taboo even the offering of a hypothesis of possible Oedipal inclinations—quite harmless as a thought. The authors of the above paper then proceed to solemnly proclaim the non-existence of the Oedipus, or even that an “assumed unconscious” could be a determinant of any import to present day behavior. I wonder that a brief speculation (presented as such in my paper on President Kennedy’s assassination) should arouse such ire and indignation. Hypothesis is, after all, merely speculation which remains to be proven or disproven. Unfortunately, this is not possible without a live and willing subject. How can the Ansbachers and the Shivericks be so sure of the non-existence of a crucial Oedipal conflict in Oswald if they never saw the man and a full case study in depth is precluded for all? If Oswald were alive the possible Oedipal nature of his inner turmoil might very well be revealed; this could be reliably determined by means of depth interviews and from the productions of phantasies, dreams, and projective tests. The foregoing article is an illuminating description of the real familial and social adversities which beset Oswald, but is not necessarily a conclusive explanation of the stark irrationality of the foul deed. The paper, in itself, proves or disproves nothing and cannot possibly supply all of the answers, from the limited data available. It is not every day that an individual murders a President and so we must never cease the probe for irrational motives as well, which might throw more light upon the insane deed.

The authors’ real bone of contention seems to be directed against Freud himself and his contributions and for this they must marshal considerably more persuasive argumentation and proof than they present here. The concurrence of the “rational” approach of Albert Ellis with their views can hardly be offered as a serious source of validation. The problem might also be posed as to why so many learned people see red when confronted with any Oedipal intimations or prefer to simply close their eyes tightly lest they be too readily contaminated or show some semblance of recognition, however faint, which might expose—you know what! Perhaps they do protest too much. Why the authors’ taboo against just looking—or thinking? Even the Bible sports its repeated tales of incest with equanimity, for all to see. Our most common curse words, off-color jokes and racial prejudices abound with incest. Our colleagues ignore the bounteous literature and mythology of all eras and cultures, past and

present, which would lend some measure of credence to Oedipal strivings and for which Freud can hardly be held responsible. How does one dismiss current Oedipal productions from children, schizophrenics, and from the dreams of so-called 'normal' individuals?⁴ How do we explain the irrationality of certain puberty rites and religious ritual? Do we have all the determinants to the flood of irrational impulses, fears and guilts which beset us all?

One cannot so blithely ignore the millennia of psychological adaptation which was vital to the survival of all species. Have all our energies been righteously absorbed in the "successful" enforcement of the Oedipal taboo so that mass murder (and individual murder as in the case of Oswald) goes unchecked? Just as there are many rational determinants which explain war, unless we seek, understand and control the ever powerful forces of the unconscious, the tragic course of war may grind on unceasingly, even though we offer all of the "correct" rational causes and cures for its being. Should we not explore any hypothesis which may provide better understanding of man's dilemma before it is too late?

JOSEPH KATZ

⁴The connection I drew between the assassination and Oswald's mother may not be so far-fetched. Consider the following recent news item, more than three years after the assassination:

The New York newspapers of April 8, 1966, report a former mental patient going berserk and slashing his mother to death. The police report stated that before the fatal attack, the 29-year-old son was with his mother and began to mumble something about the death of President Kennedy. He demanded of the mother: "Answer me yes or no." She replied gently, "Yes, son," but he jumped up, grabbed and shattered a water glass, and attacked her, slashing her on the face and neck.