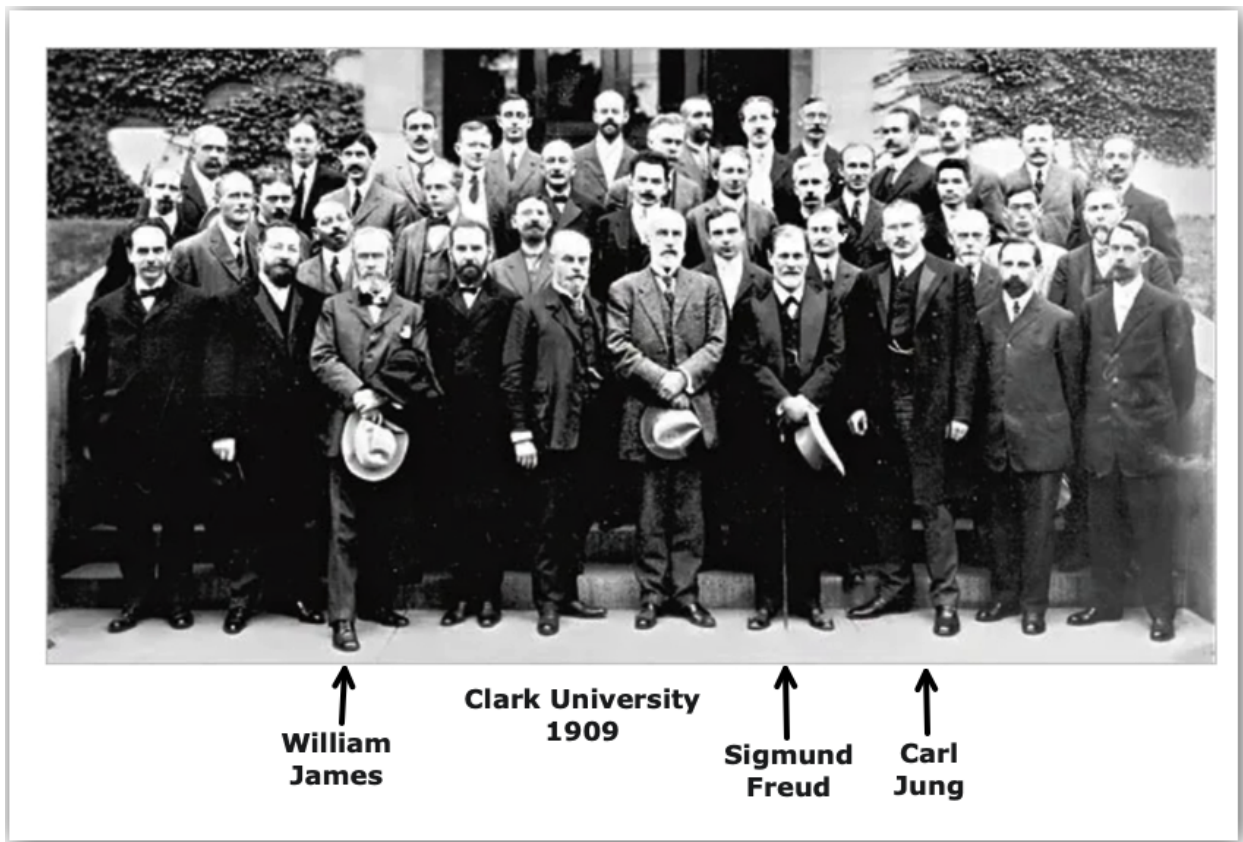


William James, Sigmund Freud, & Narrative



On Friday, September 10, 1909, 42 men gathered in front of a building at Clark University in Worcester, MA to take a group photograph which many readers have probably seen at some time or another. In the center of the photograph stands G. Stanley Hall, who had been president of Clark from its inception. He had arranged to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the opening of Clark as only the second research university in the United States by inviting a broad array of scholars from many disciplines to speak and receive honorary degrees (Evans & Koelsch, 1985). Twenty-nine theorists from differing fields accepted Hall's invitation and eight were important contributors to the behavioral and clinical sciences. They included Franz Boas (anthropology), Leo Burgerstein (medicine and education), Herbert Spencer Jennings (genetics and behavioral biology), Adolf Meyer (psychiatry), William Stern (psychology), and E. B. Titchener (psychology) among them (Rosenzweig, 1997). Hall was particularly proud of the reason for the gathering this day. He had arranged for Dr. Sigmund Freud accompanied by Drs. Carl G. Jung and Sandor Ferenczi to travel from Vienna to present a series of lectures on the "Origin and Development of Psychoanalysis" and to receive an honorary doctoral degree from Clark University.¹ A man widely-traveled throughout Europe, Freud made only this single trip to America.

¹ Jung himself was one of the 29 theorists and gave his own series of lectures as well.

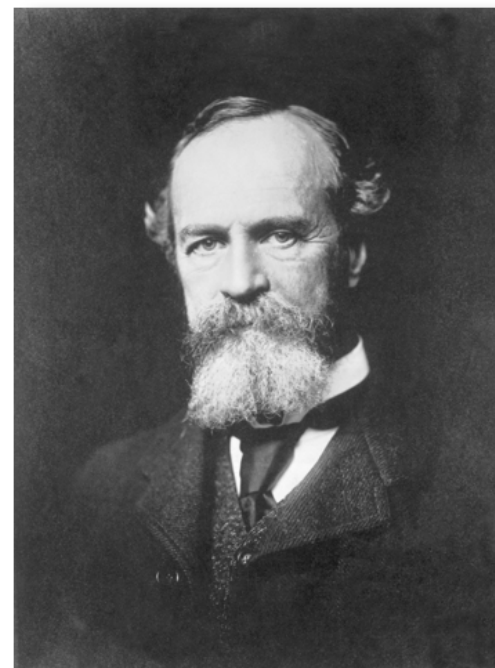
Among those listening to Freud's lecture that day was arguably the most eminent psychologist and philosopher in the United States, Prof. William James, emeritus professor at Harvard University (Richardson, 2006). Freud was 53 and James 67-years-old. Already weakened physically and burdened by significant psychological distress in 1909, James died the following year of heart disease. With James in attendance, Freud described for his audience his theory of dreams. The two also shared a private discussion and a short stroll that had to be cut short by James who may have been experiencing an angina attack (Richardson, 2006). Some commentators have remarked on the physical distance between James and Freud in the famous group photograph; it was symbolic of the skepticism that James maintained regarding Freud's formulations. While he publicly encouraged Freud, more privately James judged the founder of psychoanalysis "a man obsessed by fixed ideas" (Richardson, 2006, p. 515). He further commented to Wellesley College psychology professor Mary Whiton Calkins, "I strongly suspect Freud with his dream-theory, of being a regular *halluciné* [deluded one]" (p. 514, quoted by Richardson, 2006, italics in the original).

Whatever their disagreements professionally, both James and Freud were not only seminal contributors in the development of 20th century psychology, but provided insights into human psychological processes of direct import for the narrative perspective in the 21st. century as well. It is remarkable how frequently Freud and, in particular, James seem to be cited in contemporary publications about issues surrounding how people live their lives as storied subjects. I am convinced that each of them deserves to be looked at again or afresh from the narrativist's point of view.

William James (1842-1910)

Psychologists and social theorists approach William James with a mixture of reverence and occasional ridicule. While Douglas (1995) attributes to him a generally positive and open outlook, his life experience was frequently burdened by significant illness, both physical and psychological. James' choice of teaching physiology instead of clinical medical practice and his avoidance of laboratory work was influenced to some extent by the chronic back pain he suffered for many years. Until he came upon the work of Renouvier in the early 1870s, James had recurrent thoughts of suicide and continued to experience episodes of depressed mood for the rest of his life (Richardson, 2006).

William, the oldest son of Henry James (1811-1882) and Mary Walsh, was born in New York City in 1842. His grandfather, William James, Sr., had originally settled in Albany, NY after emigrating from County Cavan, Ireland in 1789. Originally a clerk in a small store, the older James gradually invested in land and other ventures, particularly surrounding the construction and early use of the Erie Canal. At the time of his death in 1832, James' grandfather



was said to be the 2nd wealthiest person in New York State. He disinherited his son, Henry Sr., for his dissolute behavior. But, the son sued to invalidate the will and, in overturning it, Henry Sr. gained access to a hefty fortune. William's father then underwent some type of conversion and returned to religious practice, initially as a Presbyterian. But, in the aftermath of a depressive break, he became an adherent of the mystic, Emanuel Swedenborg. During the remainder of his life, Henry Sr. published extensively on his increasingly unorthodox religious and philosophical beliefs. The family moved on a frequent basis both in the United States and Europe and the James children were educated in a rather unsystematic fashion both by tutors and attendance at various schools on both sides of the Atlantic. William's siblings included one sister and three brothers including Henry Jr., the famous novelist.

James was initially torn between the study of painting and science, particularly medicine and physiology. He attended the Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard from 1861 until entering the Harvard Medical School in 1864. He interrupted his medical studies in 1865 to travel for eight months with Louis Agassiz, a well-known naturalist at Harvard, who conducted a field trip to the Amazon to collect zoological specimens. James found the task of collecting specimens odious, an attitude which later appeared in his distaste for experimental laboratory work in psychology. In the years after his return from Brazil, James experienced multiple physical and psychological difficulties, particularly involving bouts of depression, while continuing as a student in the medical school. He traveled to Berlin where he studied with von Helmholtz and several other prominent physiologists. James finally completed his medical degree in 1869 but never practiced medicine thereafter (Menand, 2001; Richardson, 2006).

In 1872, James accepted the invitation of Harvard president, Charles Eliot, to teach a course in comparative physiology. In 1874-1875 he began to lecture on psychology and established as I've already noted a basic laboratory for physiological psychology. James never felt comfortable in the lab and hired others to supervise laboratory instruction. An engaging, witty lecturer and popular among his students, James spent more than a decade completing the two volumes of his famous synthesis, *Principles of Psychology* (1890/1950). Two years later, he produced a condensation of the *Principles* in the form of *Psychology: Briefer Course*. Even today, most commentators find the quality of James' writing in the *Principles* distinctly appealing and the scope of his ideas fruitful and challenging. Toward the end of the 19th century, James turned increasingly to philosophy where his pragmatist stance and embrace of radical empiricism put him among the major American philosophical theorists. James retired from teaching in 1907. Following a trip to Europe to care for his health, he returned to the United States where he died of heart failure at the family's summer home in Chocorua, New Hampshire on August 26, 1910 (Richardson, 2006)

WILLIAM JAMES DIES; GREAT PSYCHOLOGIST

**Brother of Novelist and Foremost
American Philosopher Was
68 Years Old.**

LONG HARVARD PROFESSOR

**Virtual Founder of Modern American
Psychology, and Exponent of Prag-
matism and Dabbled in Spooks.**

**CHOCORUA, N. H., Aug. 26.—Prof. Will-
iam James of Harvard University,
America's foremost philosophical writer,
virtual founder of the modern school of
psychology and exponent of pragmatism,
died of heart disease to-day at his Sum-
mer home here.**

-New York Times, Aug. 27, 1910, p. 7

Why does James stand as a central figure for the narrative perspective in psychology? I suggest that James advanced two primary concepts that contribute even today to the ways that

narrativists think. The first notion concerns his understanding of the nature of thinking and consciousness and the second involves his vision of the self as a plural reality.

Thinking and the Stream of Consciousness. At the beginning of Chapter IX ("The Stream of Thought") in James's (1890/1950) *Principles of Psychology*, he avows, "No one ever had a simple sensation by itself. Consciousness, from our natal day, is of a teeming multiplicity of objects and relations, and what we call simple sensations are results of discriminative attention, pushed often to a very high degree." (p. 224). He goes on to postulate his famous five characters of thought: (1) "Every thought tends to be part of a *personal consciousness*"; (2) "Within each personal consciousness thought is always *changing*"; (3) "Within each personal consciousness thought is *sensibly contiguous*"; (4) "It always appears to deal with objects *independent* of itself"; and, (5) "It is interested in some parts of these objects to the exclusion of others, and welcomes or rejects – *chooses from among them*, in a word – all the while" (p. 225; italics added).

In focusing initially upon thought and the stream of consciousness, James has rendered the mind complex and active in a way that the earlier rationalists never envisaged. Although James would be an "empiricist" (actually a "radical empiricist") in his psychological and philosophical orientation, he did not picture the human mind with the passivity that others did. The fifth character of thought cited above argues that the mind is constantly attending to different aspects of the perceptual world. The thinking self, therefore, is not merely the passive recipient of associations impressing themselves upon the mind. The seeds of later constructivist approaches to human cognition are explicit in James's understanding.

The Self: I vs. Me. James adopts a dichotomous approach to the nature of the self that has had an enduring impact upon social scientists such as George Herbert Mead as we will see in the next chapter. James divided the self into two aspects: the "I" and the "Me". **The "I" is the self as knower, a unified subjective or personal center of thinking whereas "Me" stands for the self as known** (what James [1890/1950] terms the "**Empirical Self**" or "an empirical aggregate of things objectively known" [p. 400]). At another point, James phrases his distinction in this way:

We may sum up by saying that personality implies the incessant presence of two elements, an objective person, known by a passing subjective Thought and recognized as continuing in time. *Hereafter let us use the words ME and I for the empirical person and the judging Thought*" (p. 371, emphasis in the original).

As a consequence of understanding the self in this fashion, James argues that the "empirical self" or "me" is constituted in an extremely broad way:

In its widest possible sense, however, a man's Self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account" (p. 291, emphasis in the original).

For the narrative perspective, James's strategy in dichotomizing the self serves as an important starting point. It permits us an initial way of understanding what takes place when a speaker recounts his or her life. Performing such an act, the "I" casts the self as an empirical object of investigation and exploration. That same *empirical self* might be constituted in different

ways depending upon the story told while the *knowing I* maintains a primal sense of continuity and unity across time.

The Self: The Plural Self.

James ultimately defines the plural constituents of the self as fourfold:

First, the ***material*** Self, that is, our bodies as well as our clothes, families, and all the other objects or property which falls within our ownership, control, or influence.

Secondly, the ***social*** Self which James defines as "the recognition which [we] get from [our] mates.... Properly speaking, a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind." (pp. 293-4).

Thirdly, the ***spiritual*** Self that he defines as our "inner or subjective being, psychic facilities or dispositions, taken concretely" (p. 296)

And, finally, ***pure "Ego"*** (or the "I") that constitutes the "inner principle of personal unity" in the self. (p. 342)

Probably the most radical aspect of James' explanation lies in the multiple constituents he identifies as making up the self. In a longstanding and deeply entrenched intellectual stance within Western culture, the self has been described in terms of a spirit or immaterial presence that possesses its own unity and distinctiveness from all other realities. **This position is captured succinctly by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1983) in his famous definition for the concept of the person in the West as a**

"bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against the social and natural background..." (p. 59; emphasis added).

James would doubtless agree with many aspects of Geertz's "Western" self. By invoking both material and social components as essential or constitutive of the self, James opens a new and much more radical way of apprehending persons than the Western conversation has implicitly assumed or explicitly affirmed. The objects of material culture within the purview of their owner must be weighed to achieve an adequate appreciation of the individual person. **The details of daily life in the concrete reality of homes, schools, cars, jobs, investments, tools of work, and their like are crucial to a full understand of a person as an individual.** Further, the social self of James contains at its heart **an awareness of the protean (multiple) ways in which human beings present themselves and are experienced by others. How I act in one situation may be very different than my behavior in another. Some of my colleagues and family may see me in one light while others might report on someone who appears quite different to them.** This plurality of selves grounded in James's theory of the self will be taken up in the later 20th century by clinical and social psychologists like the Dutch writer and clinician, Hubert Hermans, in his theory of the dialogical self.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939).

At Freud's death just three weeks after Hitler's forces invaded Poland in September of 1939, the poet Auden (1940) wrote a verse tribute that claimed

if he succeeded, why, the Generalised Life
would become impossible, the monolith
of State be broken and prevented
the co-operation of avengers.

To these sentiments, he added the famous estimate

to us he is no more a person
now but a whole climate of opinion.

The two generations between the first publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and his death at the beginning of the Second World War witnessed an extraordinary change in the fortunes of Freud's creation, psychoanalysis. It emerged out of the musings of a bright, if obscure Viennese neurologist to become a cultural force which some have ranked in impact with the influence of two other doctors of modernity, Darwin and Marx (Baum, 1988). The historian Ann Douglas (1995) argues that by the beginning of the 1920s Freud's influence on the intellectual and artistic life of America, and New York City in particular, was pervasive. Along with William James and Gertrude Stein, Freud could almost be said to have defined the cultural choices and psychological possibilities for that city's elite writers, teachers, and other molders of public opinion. Douglas (1995) opines

Brokers between skepticism and faith, Freud, James, and Stein collaborated, and disagreed, on the script of revolutionary change that the metropolitan moderns enacted. Moreover the contrast between Freud's posture of elite pessimism and James and Stein's stance of pluralistic optimism is crucial, I believe, to understanding the dual nature of 1920s New York – both a No Man's Land expert in modish despair and a city “built with a wish,” breeding grounds for American pop art in its most felicitous and mongrel incarnations (p. 28).

As a native of New York City, I hope to be excused for using the example of this city for which I have great affection to illustrate the force of Freud's contribution. But, regardless of specific locale, it is hard to escape the judgment that the twentieth-century conversation

New York Times
Sept. 24, 1939

DR. SIGMUND FREUD DIES IN EXILE AT 83

**Founder of Psychoanalysis
Theory Succumbs at His
Home Near London**

Special Cable to THE NEW YORK TIMES.
LONDON, Sept. 23—Dr. Sigmund Freud, originator of the theory of psychoanalysis, died shortly before midnight tonight at his son's home in Hampstead at the age of 83.

Dr. Freud fled from Austria last year when the country was invaded by Germany and had been living with his son, Dr. Ernst Freud, ever since. He had been in ill health for more than a year and yesterday he passed into a coma from which he never rallied.

His Methods Widely Discussed

One of the most widely discussed scientists of the present day and originator of countless new ideas in the field of psychology, Dr. Sigmund Freud was a man who never compromised but often modified. In his long and stormy career he set the entire world talking about psychoanalysis, the method which he originated and in which he dramatized for mankind the hampering force of inhibitions.

“The mind is an iceberg—it floats with only one-seventh of its bulk above water,” was one of his metaphorical statements on the vast preponderance of the subconscious element in human life. Another was, “The conscious mind may be compared to a fountain playing in the sun and falling back into the great subterranean pool of the subconscious from which it rises.”

throughout the Western world seized upon the conceptions Freud brought to understanding human psychology. Freud's notions had become "a whole climate of opinion" as Auden claimed. I admit that the urban centers of the American Atlantic and Pacific coasts (New York, Philadelphia, Washington, San Francisco, Los Angeles) may not have been representative of other locales and voices disparaging psychoanalysis. Freud's theorizing and clinical methods never fit comfortably in the laboratories of American departments of psychology, especially in the middle reaches of the continent.



An Austrian physician trained in neurology and neuropathology in addition to his position as the founder of psychoanalysis, Freud was born into a middle-class Jewish family in Moravia on May 6, 1856. The family moved to the capital city of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Vienna, when Freud was 4-years-old. He was educated in the gymnasium and entered the University of Vienna as a medical student in 1873. There he worked at Ernst Brücke's Physiological Institute as a research scientist even after receiving his medical degree in 1881. As a physician-resident at the Vienna General Hospital beginning in 1882, Freud rotated through various services including surgery, ophthalmology, and dermatology. He was deeply impressed by his experience in the psychiatry service headed by Theodore Meynert, an internationally recognized brain physiologist. Appointed a *Privatdozent* (Instructor) in neuropathology in 1885, Freud spent six months at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris with neurologist, Jean Martin Charcot. He returned to Vienna in 1886, set up his own practice as a neurologist, and married his fiancée, Martha Bernays (Gay, 1988)

From 1886 to 1900, Freud became increasingly involved in the treatment of patients showing symptoms of hysteria (bodily disturbances such as paralysis or sensory loss without any identifiable physical cause). His past discussions with Dr. Josef Breuer over the case of Anna O. (her real name = Bertha Pappenheim; Borch-Jacobsen, 1996), extensive conversations and correspondence with his controversial friend, the ear-nose-throat specialist, Dr. Wilhelm Fleiss, and his own attempts to understand himself through a self-analysis brought Freud eventually to publish *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1899/1900. From 1900 until the end of the First World War, Freud fostered psychoanalysis as a new science and, through extensive writing and

lecturing, gradually secured both recognition for his work and a cadre of disciples who shared his psychological vision. I discussed above his first (and only) trip to the United States in 1909 to lecture and receive an honorary degree at Clark University, an event he believed demonstrated the dawning acceptance of his theories (Gay, 1988; Rosenzweig, 1994).

During the last two decades of his life in the aftermath of the First World War, Freud found himself reformulating his basic understanding of the human mind (adding the *functional model of id-ego-superego* to the original *structural systems model of the Cs* [Conscious], *Pcs* [Preconscious], and *Ucs* [Unconscious]). His psychoanalytic practice brought many new patients to the consultation room of Berggasse 19 in Vienna. But Freud had to cope with recurrent cancer of the jaw beginning in 1923 and strongly pessimistic doubts regarding the ability of society ultimately to manage forces of irrationality and violence in common life. With the Nazi invasion of Austria in 1938, Freud's personal safety and that of his family became precarious. He was able to leave his homeland to settle in London later that year (Gay, 1988). He died on September 23, 1939 in pain and exile but celebrated internationally. In a post-mortem review critical of both Freud's scientific procedures and personal manner, Walter Kaempffert (1939), science and engineering editor of the *New York Times*, nonetheless felt compelled to conclude, "the wonder is that with methods open to so much objection he should have enriched psychology with discoveries that must be numbered among the greatest that have ever been made." (p. 64).

From the narrative perspective, Freud is important for a host of ideas and practices. These include five themes that I believe are fundamental.

(1) *Language and other behaviors are symbolic, determined, and require interpretation.* Throughout Freud's writings, he asserts that the determinism which begets any human action (and therefore the action's meaning) can be discovered by psychoanalytic techniques of free association and other interpretive procedures. For Freud, everything that humans do – dreams, thoughts, spoken language, and actions in the world – are filled with symbolic meaning. And, these can be recovered via diverse hermeneutic principles that placed a heavy reliance upon *tropes* (figures of speech), such as *metaphor* (one thing is like another: our love is like a rich meadow filled with beautiful flowers), *metonymy* (one thing stands for another: Pentagon = Department of Defense), *synecdoche* (one part stands for the whole: all hands on deck = all sailors on the ship), and others. Thus, in works like *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901/2003), he offers numerous examples of errors ("Freudian slips") in speech, reading, writing and memory. These are all, he argues, meaningful behaviors and they can be interpreted. Regarding error in all its forms, Freud (1901/2003) asserts:

Among the examples of the mistakes collected by me I can scarcely find one in which I would be obliged to attribute the speech disturbance simply and solely to what Wundt calls "contact effect of sound." Almost invariably I discover besides this a disturbing influence something outside of the intended speech. The disturbing element is either a single unconscious thought, which comes to light through the special blunder, and can only be brought to consciousness through a searching analysis, or it is a general psychic motive, which directs against the entire speech." (p. 80).

The "searching analysis" Freud speaks of includes not only simple attempts to link single associations one with the other. Rather, he offers extended and complex interpretations involving multiple layers of meaning and intentionality. His theory of condensation and displacement in

dreams – where the simple structure or elements of a particular reverie serve metaphorically or in place of multiple associative memories and wishes – underscores the plurality of meaning he believed always inhered in human activity.

(2) Case study as a method of investigation. Extensive case studies can help us understand an individual's psychology as well as general theories of psychopathology. The power of Freud's writing and thought derives not simply from the complexity and sophistication of his theoretical formulations, but certainly from the detailed and compelling case histories he offers in support of his positions. Hence, we have the stories of Anna O., Dora, Little Hans, the Rat Man, the Wolf Man, and others. While there are serious questions about the accuracy of what Freud recounts in some of these studies (e.g., Borch-Jacobsen, 1996), there is little denying that his use of this format lent a persuasive lifelikeness *prima facie* to his theories and their practical applications.

(3) Development as Storied: The Oedipal Drama of Childhood. Freud's extensive knowledge of literature in both the classical and modern eras gave him tools by which to understand psychic phenomena considering literature and myth. Probably the most famous ways in which he applied myth within psychoanalysis was his use of the ancient Greek story of Oedipus the King recounted so powerfully in the tragedy-drama of Sophocles *Oedipus Tyrannus* (Gay, 1988). In Freud's hands, the myth becomes a metaphorical guide to the ways in which young males develop within a family more generally (Mitchell & Black, 1995). Freud sees the boy from ages of 4 to 6 as engaged in a symbolic struggle within his developing psyche with the interior force of *libido* (sexualized energy) and where that libido will be attached or expressed. Initially directed toward the mother (who becomes a love object), the boy finds himself fearful that his father will discover his son's attachment toward his wife and become murderous or mutilating against him. More specifically, the boy fears that the father will castrate him, thereby removing the source of the libidinal energy, if his father fully understands the depth of the boy's love toward the mother. This "Oedipal conflict" forces the boy to make changes in his desires. By age 6, Freud holds, he will have renounced his love for the mother and attempt to imitate his father (strategies to assuage the feared object). Though the boy "loses" the mother, he decides to seek one day to love a woman like his mother and symbolically attain his original goal.

While many commentators have found Freud's theory of the Oedipal complex a fanciful but false creation, the importance of this approach has been both culturally and psychologically powerful. For narrativists, Freud's boldness consists in grounding the processes of child development within a dramatic framework. The unfolding events in the psychological development of boys and girls (the latter expressed in a parallel but less influential theory of the "Electra" complex for female development) are not random or meaningless. Rather they can be united in the form of a plot and development itself can be understood as storied.

(4) Time and the Unconscious. Freud's theory of primary process and its functioning within the id problematized time and sequence in human storytelling abilities. Processes of psychological defense and distortion could transpose events in time or create non-linear symbolic associations in events and experience. Freud's use of the archeological (rather than narrative) metaphor to understand the process of therapeutic dialogue – the unearthing of long-buried associations or memories in the life of a patient – received a fundamental and ultimately fatal challenge by the arguments of Donald Spence (1984) in his seminal volume, *Narrative Truth and*

Historical Truth. Nonetheless, Freud's flexible approach to chronology is a fundamental contribution to 20th century modernity.

(5) *The practice of psychotherapy.* Let me add a final observation about Freud's contributions. It centers on the practice of psychotherapy itself. I need to point out that the consulting rooms of physicians have been the scenes of narrative exchange for millennia. In fact, dream interpretation was not an original contribution by Freud but can be found in the practices of ancient Greek medicine two thousand years earlier.² The classical diviner, Artemidorus of Daldis (2nd century CE/1990), authored an influential volume, *Oneirocritica* (= "dream interpretation") in the 2nd century CE (Walde, 1999). He and other practitioners of the interpretative arts employed a clear taxonomy of dream types in working with their patients. Dreams could be (1) symbolic and filled with metaphorical images and language that required interpretation, (2) visionary scenes portraying a future time or predicting future events, or (3) oracular pronouncements, that is, clear guidance offered the dreamer by important figures, relatives, or gods about desirable future behavior (Dodds, 1951/2004). Nonetheless, **Freud's insight that healing began with the telling of the patient's own story – as incomplete and filled with distortions as it might be – serves in some way as his signal contribution.** He elaborated an extensive set of interpretative principles and practices that served to structure the encounter of patient and analyst. And these have been subject to so many changes and challenges that we sometimes forget about his advocacy of the more basic commitment in therapy of one person encountering another with the intent of a narrative exchange. The enduring power of therapist-patient encounters in pursuit of a storied path to healing is the product mostly of Freud's clinical genius.

² In an encyclopedic review of the original sources in the 19th century, Ellenberger (1970) effectively demolishes the assumption that Freud was also the first to discover the unconscious.