

So Much Water, So Close to Home:

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*A Psychoanalytic Exploration
of Raymond Carver's Short-story
and its Creative Adaptation and
Transformation by Australian Artists
into Film and Song.*

Panel discussion from the 2017 PPAA conference

Introduction: Anne Jeffs

Panellists: Carol Bolton, Ann Cebon, Paul McEvoy

Introduction:

The idea for this exploration of film, short story and song was conceived in a maelstrom of stresses and creative ideas occurring in my work as a co-scientific

chair of the 2016 PPAA conference, the theme of which was “When the Centre Does Not Hold”. As can occur with such events, a series of happenings left us at the 11th hour one paper short. In addition, it seemed particularly important to represent the Indigenous experience given the theme of the conference, suggestive as it was of individual and social trauma, but we had not yet been successful in achieving this.

Our various attempts to have Indigenous issues represented—even an early thought of holding the conference in the red Centre of Uluru—had not come to fruition. I was bothered by both the literal and the symbolic gap in our program, especially given that constitutional reform to include recognition of indigenous people was being addressed in the wider society this year.

It felt to me that to proceed with an Australasian psychoanalytic psychotherapy conference that explored the issues of trauma and dissociation at an individual and societal level, and NOT represent the trauma at the centre of our history would be to turn a blind eye in a most egregious way. It was from this line of thought that the film “Jindabyne”, with themes of turning a blind eye and indigenous-coloniser relations, came to mind. Following this initial idea of *Jindabyne*, I then remembered the inspiration for this film: Raymond Carver’s 1975 short story, *So much water, so close to home*. My mind was then taken to Australian singer-song writer, Paul Kelly’s song *Everything Turns to White*, which was also inspired by the same story. These various associations and links led me to conceive the idea of a panel of PPAA members to explore the powerful themes in these interrelated texts. The three invited panellists were directed for inspiration towards the approaches of David Stratton and Margaret Pomeranz (ex-ABC) from *At the Movies*, and Jennifer Byrnes and her crew at *The Book Club* (ABC), and to explore the texts around the conference theme “When the Centre Cannot Hold”, especially from a psychoanalytic point of view.

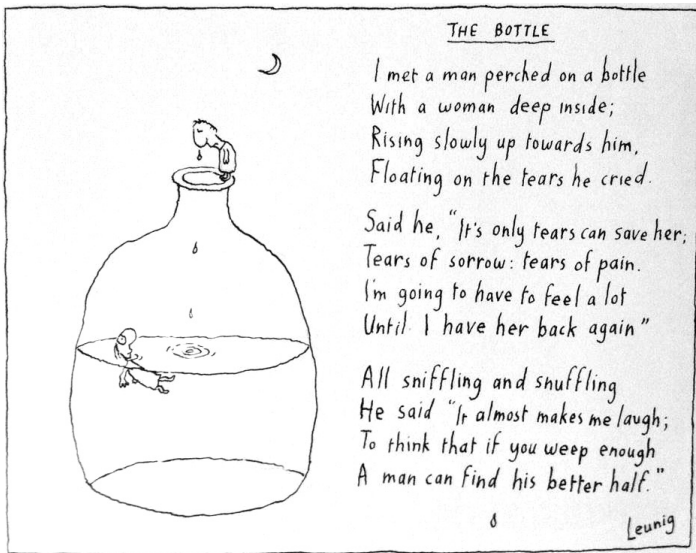
Raymond Carver’s 1975 short story, *So much water, so close to home*, tells the tale of a fishing trip unexpectedly gone wrong by the unwelcome discovery of a dead woman’s body. The fishermen’s response to this discovery (they end up tethering her in the river and continue with their leisure) and the ramifications of this response, structures the majority of the story. We witness the slow excavation of a marriage and the strong propensity of some involved in the event to want to return to business as usual, versus the sense for others that nothing can ever be the same. The key question in relation to the second stance is whether permanent break-down is the only option or whether mourning, reparation and transformation might just be possible.

Two Australian artists were captivated enough by this short story to make their own creative adaptations. In 1989, song-writer Paul Kelly wrote

'Everything Turns to White', and Ray Lawrence (director) and Beatrix Christian (script writer) in 2006 produced the film *Jindabyne*. This last adaptation further layers the metaphor of the men fishing over the dead woman's body, by making her a young Indigenous woman. Issues around Indigenous- non-Indigenous relations; male and female relations; trauma lying just beneath the surface of things; identification with the aggressor versus introjective identification with the victim are all present in these stories.

Participants in the session were encouraged, but not required, to read, listen to and view these three versions of the same story prior to this session. Audience participation was welcomed. Readers will find that engaging with the three texts referred to may enhance their experience of these papers.

Audience members responded with enthusiasm and thoughtfulness to the Panel response and discussion. Poignantly, given the difficulty we had had in ensuring that Indigenous issues were represented at the conference, the Welcome to Country did not occur at the beginning of the conference, as the invited guest did not turn up and was unable to be contacted. Feeling the loss of this, as if our Centre could not quite hold, at the end of this panel presentation we decided to show a clip of the Smoking Ceremony held for the dead indigenous woman in the film *Jindabyne*. We learnt the next day that our indigenous guest had been unable to attend due to Sorry Business.



LEUNIG

Anne Jeffs

annejeffs@hotmail.com

Contribution to the 2017 PPAA Conference Panel:

So Much Water, So Close to Home

CAROL BOLTON

In the time I have available I want to explore three issues: the meaning of what we have been asked to do, what is falling apart and then the short story itself. I will start by taking apart the title of our discussion:

A psychoanalytic exploration of a work of literature or some other creative form.

What does that mean? What do we bring to the encounter from our theoretical position that is special or helpful? I believe that we do bring some things and I will come to that later but first I want to propose that mostly it is literature which illuminates psychoanalysis rather than the other way round. Poets knew about the unconscious long before Freud, as I think he

acknowledged. Think of Lady Macbeth's response to her guilt for instance in the sleepwalking scene (Shakespeare, W. 1606. Act V, scene 1) the doctor who is brought to see what is happening says that the matter is beyond his expertise, but we all know what is going on.

The Greek dramatists are a source of deep insight into family dynamics. Blake writes about envy and the death instinct among other things in his poem *The Sick Rose*. (Blake, W. *Songs of Experience*. 1794)

O Rose thou art sick
 The invisible worm
 That flies in the night
 In the howling storm
 Has found out thy bed
 Of crimson joy
 And his dark secret love
 Does thy life destroy.

And Tennyson, who explores loss and grief very insightfully in *In Memoriam*, had clearly done an Infant Observation. Listen to this:

The baby new to earth and sky
 What time his tender palm is pressed
 Against the circle of the breast
 Has never thought that 'this is I'

But as he grows he gathers much,
 And learns the use of I and me
 And finds 'I am not what I see
 And other than the things I touch'

Sorounds he to a separate mind
 From whence clear memory may begin
 As through the frame that binds him in
 His isolation is defined.

(Tennyson, A. *In Memoriam*, 1850)

So, in the light of these, and many more similar examples I approach the question of what our theory can bring to the reading of literature with humility. Maybe we have more to learn from literature than to add to it. I do think that we have some things to offer from a psychoanalytic perspective and I will come to those

soon in discussing the short story. But before I do that I would like to consider the theme of the conference “The centre cannot hold”. What could that mean for Yeats and then for us? The poem from which the quotation is taken is in a volume published in 1921. The previous few years had seen not only the horror of the First World War but also the Anglo-Irish conflict which included the Easter rising of 1916. Yeats knew the men who were arrested and executed by firing squad at that time and was much involved in the Irish question. This is what the wife of one of the executed men said about her last contact:

I had to stand there at the cell door while the soldier locked the door of what seemed to be my husband’s tomb. How I held myself together, with my head up I do not know, I must have turned to stone ... but the sound of the key in that lock has haunted me ever since. (Toibin, 2016)

It was a deeply troubled time, safety, social order, trust and community all fell apart. Yeats I believe, in this poem and in others is drawing on both the internal and the external sense of things falling apart. The connection between internal and external is of obvious interest to us and is also very relevant to the short story which I will discuss soon. Yeats also uses symbolism in a way which is familiar to us in our work. In a poem published a few years later he uses symbols which stand for both inner and outer. In *Sailing to Byzantium* he writes:

An aged man is but a paltry thing
 A tattered coat upon a stick unless
 Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
 For every tatter in its mortal dress
 Nor is there singing school but studying
 Monuments of its own magnificence
 And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
 To the holy city of Byzantium.

I think that for Yeats the holy City of Byzantium is a container in both the external and internal worlds. It stands for order, continuity, security, a refuge and on the inner level it stands for a safe place for the soul, a holding place for the psyche. When the holy city is under threat then things fall apart.

Inner and outer are connected and vulnerable. When we come to the discussion it will be interesting to see how this audience understands and experiences things falling apart but for the moment I would like to turn to the works we have been asked to consider.

I shall concentrate mostly on the short story which I think is the most interesting and powerful of the three iterations we were offered, but I will make some reference to the film. There are many themes here and many strands of meaning

which I expect we shall explore in our discussion. I would like to start with what I see as the central theme of the story: the denial of death and of destructive processes and the consequences of this. The men who go on the camping trip cut themselves off totally from the death they encounter. They disregard their own feeling and social and cultural meanings of death, but more than this, they simply block death out. This has many consequences, the most serious being that if you deny death you also deny life. The fishing group dulls itself with alcohol, but at a more intensive level thinking and feeling are dulled. Perhaps this is a place where the film has something to add. The environment is so beautiful in its wildness and the men are so cut off from any real contact with nature. The usual liveliness and energy of camping in the bush are absent.

Death intersects with life all the time and at many levels. Again a poet puts it well although in the prose of a sermon this time “Any man’s death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind” says John Donne “And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee.” (Donne, 1624). Involved in mankind—exactly what these men are not. And a modern analyst has this to say: “the psychotic state is one characterised by a hatred of reality The mind becomes a kind of machine for evacuation”(Eaton, 2001).

I think this describes the state of mind of the men in this story and also helps us to come close to the mind of the narrator who is struggling against these psychotic energies in the men, in society and in herself.

Love and hate can come together in the depressive position and I suppose that the ultimate depressive position is an ability to hold life and death in mind together. Not an easy thing to do but if death/hate is denied so is life/love. Mourning is the link between life and death, when feelings are denied there is a lack of meaning.

If I put my Lit Crit hat on to approach this story then one of its great strengths is the point of view from which it has been told. As the story is seen through the eyes of the wife that leads to particular subtleties which are not available to the film. Are we to believe her account? Are there things which she leaves out or distorts? I sometimes found myself wondering as I read, what I might be missing. This took me back to my psychoanalytic position; reading the story is in some ways like being with a patient: listening, trying to stand with the narrator’s mind while also listening to one’s own response and counter transference. I had a fantasy that I might be getting it all wrong and that my colleagues, seeing things that I don’t see, would expose my inadequacies. Is this my material or is it a kind of literary counter transference? I am inclined to think mostly the latter. The writer is able to evoke fear and uncertainty both in the narrator and in the reader. Whatever we decide about the narrator’s account she makes two statements about what may be falling apart:

*People no longer care what happens to other people and
Nothing makes any real difference any more*

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It seems to me that at the centre of this story is the narrator's identification with the victim. That is how I understand the title "So much water so close to home." It is as if she experiences herself as the dead girl and links her own returning memories of unresolved trauma with the girl's terrifying experiences. So her whole sense of self, perhaps never very strong, is falling apart. She lives in a terrifying world where people don't care and where nothing makes a difference. When she says, at the end "For God's sake Stuart she was only a child" she is talking about herself.

Does our professional understanding about identification help us? It might allow us to make theoretical explanations. Does it also affect our reading of the story? Perhaps it sharpens for us our thinking about the husband/wife relationship. The vicissitudes of this relationship clearly predate the events of the story but are thrown into focus as the wife reacts to the hands which with so little feeling touched the dead girl also try to touch her. Is there any hope for this marriage? Can they possibly deal with the hate as well as the love and in this way bring life back.

Finally I would like to consider the symbolic significance of water. As I thought about my associations to water and rivers in particular I thought of the mythical rivers Lethe and Styx. Lethe is the river whose water brings forgetfulness and Styx is the river which separates life from death. They are both very close in this story but I don't think you need psychoanalytic training to see that. At another level water is sometime related to the unconscious and, also in Australia particularly, to life and growth, where here it is related to death. This might be seen as another example of splitting the good and the bad which I see as the central theme of the story.

So on the whole I am coming down on the side of literature being where the insights are although as I hope I have suggested, our psychoanalytic position can add and expand some insights. Literature is one of the things which doesn't fall apart. For me at least it provides a strong link to the centre. It links me to my culture and traditions and to other cultures beyond my own. It is a kind of container in which I connect with other minds and indeed, to quote John Donne, it involves me with all mankind. What I hope I may have done is stir up some discussion on this matter.

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Carol Bolton

boltonc@iinet.net.au

Contribution to the 2017 PPAA Conference Panel:

So Much Water, So Close to Home

ANN CEBON

What an interesting task Paul, Carol and I have been given!

Even though I'm not an ABC film reviewer like David Stratten or Margaret Pomerantz, nor a Jennifer Burns from the ABC Book Club, I am going to try to review this fascinating short story, "So much Water, so Close to Home", which inspired the film *Jindabyne*, as well as the Paul Kelly song, "Everything's Turning to White".

I'm going to approach this through two psychoanalytic concepts, in the hope of stimulating some discussion around the topic of our Conference: "Things Fall Apart, The Centre Cannot Hold".

Raymond Carver's story focuses on one of the four men who are all friends. Carver describes the four as "decent and responsible". They each

have a partner and a family and jobs. They plan their regular fishing trip. In spite of there being “so much water so close to home”, they drive into the mountains, then hike for miles carrying all their supplies, including ample supplies of whiskey. They set up camp and it is the main character, Stuart, fishing alone, who finds the naked body of a girl floating in the river. The short story says, and I quote, “He called the other men and they came to look at her. They talked about what to do. One of the men ... thought that they should start back to the car at once. The others stirred the sand with their shoes, and said that they felt inclined to stay. They pleaded fatigue, the late hour, the fact that the girl ‘wasn’t going anywhere’. In the end they all decided to stay”. (Carver, 1993, p. 71).

Interestingly, in the film *Jindabyne*, which is based on the short story, this scene is developed in a particular way. Stuart, wading in the water, sees something from afar. He wades over. When he realises that it is the body of a young girl, naked, face down in the water, he curses and screams. He screams for the others to come, like a terrified child. The three others hear him and come running.

In the film it is Billy whom they call “The Boy”, who thinks they should leave immediately in order to raise the alarm, but the others pressure him to stay and he acquiesces. He gives in.

I think that for me this is a pivotal moment in the story. Based on this moment, I’d like to look at the group phenomenon through the lens of Wilfred Bion’s concept of group process. I imagine that most of you are familiar with his book entitled “*Experiences In Groups*”, first published in 1968 nearly fifty years ago. In the introduction Bion writes, and I quote, “As a practising psychoanalyst, I am impressed by the fact that the Psychoanalytic approach, through the individual and through the group, are dealing with different facets of the same phenomenon.” (Bion, 1968, p. 8).

His focus is located on the central importance of the Kleinian theories of projective identification and the interplay between the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions.

The four men are indeed a group. They had a “task” in the widest sense of the word, when they went on their fishing trip together. That “task” changed in a terrible way with the discovery of the body of the girl. But then something so powerful happened to them, leaving them horrified and terrified. The least powerful of the four, “The boy” Billy, acquiesces to the group’s wish to stay and the four of them continue to fish, around the girl’s body. There is a scene in the film where Billy, having caught his first fish, poses for a photo, smiling happily and proudly. Yet we are left to assume that alone, he might have acted differently. The group process subsumes him.

Bion's conceptualisation of group process is that, as I have said, a group has a task, but that pathological group processes can undermine the task, so that the group cannot function. This transforms, or, in this case, catapults, a group into what he calls a "Basic Assumption Group," governed by paranoid-schizoid processes.

Do you think that the group of four men in the short story lose their collective mind?

Certainly, they can't think things through, and they pressure Billy and undermine his wish to do the right thing. Once he agrees to stay, inertia sets in. The writer here conveys his emotional insight, for the inertia that now possesses the group is the symptom of things falling apart and a sign that the centre (of the group) cannot hold.

The men fish and they drink. In the story, Raymond Carver focusses on the drinking. They drink whisky at the evening meal we are told. As they drink they talk about the girl's body. Quoting from the short story: "Someone thought they should do something to prevent the body from floating away. Somehow, they thought that this might create a problem for them, if it floated away during the night." (Carver, p. 71). They drink a lot more whisky before, in the dark, they go down to the river. They secure the dead girl's body with a nylon cord around her wrist and tie it to tree roots. Raymond Carver writes, "All the while, the flashlights of the other men played over the girl's body." (Carver, p. 72).

Afterwards, they have coffee and whisky and play cards. They drink until they can't see the cards any more. The next morning they keep drinking whisky.

What are they group of four men drowning with their whisky?

In the film, it is in the morning that Billy ventures a criticism. He says, "We shouldn't have moved her. We interfered with a crime scene." But without a response from his three older companions, he too goes fishing.

I turn now to Bion because I think that his theory of group functioning might have something to add to our discussion to follow, not in the form of answers, but in the form of questions. In the film, when it's time to go the four men break camp, hike back to the car, and drive until they gain phone reception and call the local policeman. At this point these four men, who Raymond Carver describes as "decent and responsible" are genuinely taken aback when the policeman tells them that they can't just let him know about the body of the girl in the water and drive on home. The policeman tells them to wait there until he comes. In the short story, Carver writes "they had nothing to hide, and they weren't ashamed of anything." (p. 73). Yet, there is a revealing interchange in the film while the men wait for the policeman to come, in which Stuart says to the others "We got to get this story straight." This is a very significant moment. Perhaps they

experience some guilt, or even just some doubt, about what they did do, or what they failed to do.

What happens to their individual minds, or to the mind of the group, when Stuart finds the body and screams with terror?

What pathological defences does the group employ when their collective centre will not hold? Is it that they cannot bear having feelings of helplessness and vulnerability and the guilt and the pain that it might engender in them?

In the movie there are sub-plots referring to past trauma. Vern and his wife had a grown daughter who has died, and they are rearing their seven year-old troubled grand-daughter. She is struggling with pre-occupations with death and co-opts Stuart's son to kill the school's guinea pig. There is a scene where she has a dead bird, and there is a suggestion that she believes that magic can bring it back to life. Is this a wish to bring her mother back to life?

But her grandparents can't help her. Her grandmother tells her teacher and Claire that the little girl doesn't need any counselling. "They aren't going there", as the saying goes. Mourning is evaded. We might say that if they could allow themselves to experience those feelings, they might, eventually, feel better. Here is another fork in the road: one road leads to emotional breakdown, violence and repetition; the other road offers the possibility of grief, reparation, growth, transformation and recovery.

This takes us back to the title of the short story: "So Much Water, So Close to Home." The title is enigmatic. What does it mean? What is it referring to? One thought I have takes me to the central couple in the short story and the film, Claire and Stuart.

Stuart returns late at night after their weekend fishing trip. Next morning he and his wife Claire are woken by police knocking at the door. It is only then that Stuart tells Claire that he and his friends found the body of the murdered girl. Claire is stunned. How could he not have told her the night before?

They go for a ride together. They stop at a park near home where, we read in the story there are a dozen or so men and boys fishing. Claire asks herself, "Why did they have to go miles away to fish?" I ask myself, what did they have to get away from? What did each of them have to escape from? What feelings or knowledge did they have to go far away from home to keep on denying, to keep on trying to avoid being affected by?

These questions lead me to the second psychoanalytic concept that I want to focus on, again in order to raise questions, and that is the work of the British psychoanalyst John Steiner and specifically his 1985 paper, entitled, "Turning a Blind Eye: The Cover-up for Oedipus."

In the first paragraph of the paper he writes:

In recent years, it has become evident that our contact with reality is not an all or none affair and psychoanalysts have become particularly interested in situations where reality is not simply evaded but is in addition distorted and misrepresented. In this paper, I want to consider one such situation, namely that in which we seem to have access to reality but choose to ignore it because it proves convenient to do so. I refer to this mechanism as *turning a blind eye*, because I think this conveys the right degree of ambiguity as to how conscious or unconscious the knowledge is. At one extreme we are dealing with simple fraud where all the facts are not only accessible but have led to a conclusion which is then knowingly evaded. More often, however, we are vaguely aware that we choose not to look at the facts, without being conscious of what it is we are evading. These evasions may lead to a sense of dishonesty, and to various manoeuvres which deny or conceal what has happened by creating a *cover-up*. (Steiner, 1985, p. 161).

Steiner continues:

We are familiar with the idea of graduations in our sense of awareness, because we recognise that different mechanisms of defence affect our contact with reality in different ways. In repression, for example, a symbolic connection with reality is retained even if the actual material, which led to the conflict, is unconscious. With projective identification, contact may be completely lost, or may be vicariously retained through the reality sense of another person. (p. 161).

These ideas raise questions in relation to the two central characters, Claire and Stuart. Stuart presents himself as an innocent victim, dominated by forces which he can neither understand nor control. He feels humiliated, frustrated, and angry. The short story opens as Stuart angrily asks his wife, Claire, "Tell me what I did wrong and I'll listen! It's not fair. She was dead, wasn't she ...?" He continues, "There were other men there, besides me. We talked it over and we all decided ... What the hell, I don't see anything wrong. No, I don't". (p. 69). Claire says simply, "You know". He says "She was dead, Claire. Now let's leave it alone." Claire responds, "That's the point. She was dead. But don't you see? She needed help." (p. 70).

Here again, I find the concept of turning a blind eye very enlightening. One cannot say that Stuart was completely ignorant of the reality he was evading. You may recall that in the film, while waiting for the police, it was Stuart who said "We need to get our story straight."

It was not that mechanisms such as splitting or repression were at work. Stuart turned a blind eye and then tried to maintain a cover-up, both to Claire and others, but also to himself. This fuels his feelings of moral righteousness and superiority.

He knows. And at the same time, he doesn't know. Perhaps, in the discussion, we can touch on the end of the film. Billy and his young family have left. The

three men sit drinking beer, and one of them asks the others “What happened out there?” Here there is hope of change.

Returning to Stuart and Claire, Claire, vulnerable as she is, (or is not), feels things that Stuart can’t bear to feel. She feels compassion for the murdered girl, which Stuart cannot bear to feel. She wants to know. Her desire is to know and her compassion, both in the short story and in the film, drives her to take the perilous journey to the dead girl’s funeral.

Incidentally, Claire and Stuart’s young son, Dean, who is perhaps six or eight years old, also wants to know. The murder of the girl is in the newspapers. In the story, it is at school that the children tell Dean that his father found a dead body in the river. Dean wants to know about it. He asks his parents. They try to silence him, but he persists. Dean wants to know, unlike his father, Stuart, who wishes not to know.

In the story, Stuart tells his son “It was just a body and that’s all there is to it.” Claire’s reaction, hearing this, is to start, and she almost drops a plate that she is holding. When Stuart asks her “What’s the matter with you?”, she says, “You scared me.” (p. 81). Claire knows about the violence, both overt and covert. She knows about the violence of the murder, of the action and inaction of the group, and also the violence of the silence.

In conclusion, might we say that she is the recipient of his knowledge, through projective identification? This pathological dynamic both tears them asunder and binds them together. Stuart’s incapacity to see what he actually knew, but refused to let into his mind was known by Claire, and became her “illness”.

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Ann Cebon

anncebon@me.com

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So Much Water, So Close to Home

PAUL McEVOY

My first contact with this story was through Paul Kelly's haunting song, "Everything's Turning to White", (Kelly, 1989) which so disturbed me that I sought out the short story by Raymond Carver which inspired the song. Only recently did I learn that there are five published versions of the story. Of these, four are versions of the original story published in 1977 (Carver, 1977), with minor changes. A substantially shorter version, heavily influenced by Carver's editor, Gordon Lish and with significant differences, was published four years later (Carver, 1981). This truncated version appears to be the basis for Paul Kelly's song. In later collections, Carver returned to the longer version. He suggested that the shorter and longer versions should be regarded as different stories. My comments predominantly focus on the

extended version of *So much water so close to home* published in a collection chosen by Carver himself, shortly before his death (Carver, 1988). I will make some reference to Kelly's song, and to Ray Lawrence's film, *Jindabyne* (Bateman, P., Charny, G., & Jarman, C., 2006) although for the purpose of this exercise, I find the film less helpful. This is not a criticism of the film, which I recommend. However, *Jindabyne* introduces a number of significant changes and additional themes, including the addition of racial issues; narration from an "objective" point of view of rather than from Claire's subjective perspective; "gentrifying" Stuart's character and amplifying Claire's mental health history; and arresting the disintegration toward the end of the film. In my view these changes and additions dilute the disturbing rawness of Carver's exploration of gender, power and violence, relationships and disintegration—in effect creating a third version of the story.

As instructed, I have thought about this story in the context of our conference theme, "*Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold*". All versions of the story focus on the impact of the men's fishing expedition, and their apparent disregard for the young female murder victim, on the relationship between Stuart and Claire, and on Claire herself. The question of *whether the centre can hold* in light of the shocking disclosure is dealt with differently in each version of the story. In each there is a tension between the possibility of Claire's disintegration, and the disintegration of the relationship. *Jindabyne* presents both possibilities, but offers an apparent (and in my view disappointing) resolution to the disintegratory tension, when, in the penultimate scene, Stuart apologises to the family of the murdered girl, and soon after says, "I want you to come home, Claire." The implication is that the potential disintegration is averted, that they go home and live happily ever after: nothing falls apart, and both the marriage and Claire remain intact. The next scene cuts to the murderer, preparing for his next victim, relocating the threat from the inner space to the outer, further minimising the threat of disintegration. The other versions, however, maintain the disintegratory tension. In Paul Kelly's song, the relationship is held together, but at the cost of Claire's internal cohesion. Kelly's Claire says,

*"When he holds me now I'm pretending
Nothing is working inside
And behind my eyes, my daily disguise
Everything's turning to white"* (Kelly, 1989)

This conclusion appears to reflect the short version of Carver's story, wherein at the end, Claire continues her relationship with Stuart, but from a position

of depersonalised compliance rather than desire. In the longer version, Claire consistently rejects Stuart's sexual overtures, his only apparent means of seeking engagement, leaving us with a very clear sense that *the centre cannot hold*—that something must fall apart, and that most likely it will be the relationship.

Freud tells us that psychological maturation requires progression beyond a life dominated by the pleasure principle and immediate gratification, to a life more directed by the reality principle. He says,

“an ego thus educated has become ‘reasonable’; it no longer lets itself be governed by the pleasure principle, but obeys the reality principle, which also, at bottom, seeks to obtain pleasure, but pleasure which is assured through taking account of reality, even though it is pleasure postponed and diminished”. (Freud, 1974, p. 402)

The reality principle requires thought, reflection and consideration of the needs of others, and of long term consequences. The reality principle does not deny pleasure, but seeks to balance the impulse to immediate gratification with consideration of “the bigger picture” or “the greater good”. Other psychoanalytic writers have, in a similar vein differentiated between “archaic functioning”, wherein the quest to gratify unmet infantile emotional needs dominates life, and “mature functioning”. The actions of the men in Carver's story graphically illustrate the predominance of the pleasure principle and archaic functioning. They are unwilling to allow the reality of their tragic discovery to get in the way of their pleasurable fishing trip. This is beautifully illustrated in *Jindabyne* by the laconic local cop, who, having symbolically lined the men up like recalcitrant schoolboys, says to them, “*We don't step over bodies to enjoy our leisure activities. You're a pack of bloody idiots. I'm ashamed of you. The whole town's ashamed of you.*” Not a lot of developmental maturation in evidence. Claire's decision-making also appears to have been dominated by the pleasure principle, and archaic needs. Her account of the development of the relationship with Stuart suggests that it occurred with little thought or reflection. Referring to herself in a depersonalised third person, she says, “*Eventually, seeing that's his aim, she lets him seduce her. She had an intuition at the time, an insight about the seduction that later, try as she might, she couldn't recall.*” (Carver, 1988, p. 181) The implication is that she knew that something was wrong, but chose the path of least resistance: she chose not to think about it. In the last sentence of the story, Claire says “*For God's sake Stuart, she was only a child.*” (p. 192) Her identification with the victim leaves little doubt that the “child” she refers to is not only the murder victim, but also herself? Her description certainly suggests child-like functioning when she entered the relationship.

Claire's depersonalised account of the development of the relationship continues:

After a short while they decide to get married, but already *the past, her past, is slipping away*. The future is something she can't imagine. She smiles, as if she has a secret, when she thinks about the future. Once, during a particularly bad argument, over what she can't now remember, five years or so after they were married, he tells her that someday this affair (his words: "*this affair*") *will end in violence*. She remembers this. She files this away somewhere and *begins repeating it aloud from time to time ... But every afternoon at four o'clock her head begins to hurt* (p. 181).

Claire's developing symptoms lead to a brief hospitalisation, and the lingering stigma of her "instability". The question of Claire's emotional vulnerability is approached differently in each version of the story, although to varying degrees in each it is used to question the validity of her identification with the murdered girl and of her subsequent response to Stuart. The short version of the story, and the Paul Kelly song, see Claire employing the depersonalised/dissociative defence of "turning everything to white" in order to tolerate an ongoing relationship with Stuart. The potency of this depersonalisation implies trauma and vulnerability which predate the relationship. *Jindabyne*, while less specific about the nature of her vulnerability, amplifies Claire's mental health issues to a degree which also suggests that it is of long standing, and pre-dates the marriage. In the film she is reported to have left her husband and son for 18 months, while in the Carver story her absence is due to a hospital admission for a few weeks. However, while *So Much Water* hints at early contributions to her vulnerability, Claire's fragile mental state is inextricably tied to the archaic, dysfunctional relationship, (eg her "four o'clock headaches") and perhaps to a more systemic, societal dysfunction.

Claire is portrayed as initially accepting being objectified in the relationship, and even colluding ("*I turned slightly then moved my legs*" (p. 176), or her account (p. 182) of hearing other women in the hospital talking about fellatio, and thinking that Stuart would be pleased to hear this). However, Carver presents an even broader disturbance. Claire acquiesces to a dysfunctional relationship, but in the world she recounts, this is the only kind of relationship which men offer. Central to the story is the apparent absence in the men of any appropriate affective response to the discovery of the murdered and violated girl, implying that there is nothing unusual about a violated, victimised woman. This view is particularly powerfully articulated in her later identification with the objectified victim's body: "for the last twenty four hours, men have been examining it, putting things into it, cutting, weighing, measuring, putting back again, sewing

up ...” (p. 180). By the end of the story, Claire comes to see all men, including Stuart, as incapable of warmth or care, as menacing, sexually predatory and destructive of what cannot be possessed or controlled. This is a world in which sex and violence are primitively and inextricably linked. However, the story is told through Claire’s eyes, and Carver leaves enough doubt about Claire’s subjectivity that we cannot be sure whether this is an accurate statement of external reality or a view of the world informed by Claire’s traumatic experience—the familiar uncertain world of the therapist. The encounter with the man on the road to the funeral is a case in point. Claire’s interpretation of his words and actions is that they are predatory and threatening, but the text is sufficiently unclear to leave doubt about the accuracy of that interpretation.

In Carver’s story things **do** fall apart, the centre **cannot** hold. Claire’s initial choice to sublimate herself to this relationship contributes to a diminishing identity, to her falling apart, relinquishing what fragile centre she had. Her observation that “already *the past, her past, is slipping away*” reflects her gradual loss of identity. The reality which emerges in light of Stuart’s dismissive treatment of the murdered woman, is that in Stuart’s view, women are not people but rather a set of functions, with sexual gratification prominent among them. When no longer available to function, the woman ceases to have value. In the 1981 short version of the story, and in Kelly’s song, Claire continues to acquiesce to Stuart’s sexual demands (albeit with no feeling) perpetuating the illusion of a relationship, of a centre which is holding. In longer version however, she rejects these later advances, no longer willing to sustain the *illusion* of a viable relationship. As Claire moves increasingly to identifying with the victim, and declares the murdered girl and herself to be separate people, worthy of love, care and respect, the relationship between Stuart and Claire begins to disintegrate. The centre cannot hold, but the implication is that the “centre” of this relationship was illusory anyway. A similar question about whether a centre is real or illusory arises with respect to the group of men. When they discovered the girl’s body, “*one of them thought they should start back to the car at once. The others stirred the sand with their shoes and said they felt inclined to stay.*” (p. 175) Why was a group decision necessary, and why did all four need to accede to it? What prevented the dissenting man from setting out alone that night, or at least the following morning? Ray Lawrence commented that this is a story about people clinging together in order to survive. Perhaps that’s what the men did at the river. Perhaps that’s what Claire and Stuart did—clung together for survival, dominated by the pleasure principle (fear of “unpleasure”) or archaic longings. In terms of the theme of this conference, it left me wondering whether centres which cannot hold are not centres at all, but simply illusions based on archaic longing, but devoid of

mature thought, of the reality principle. The illusion of a centre, for both the group of men, and for Stuart and Claire was *sustained by acquiescence*—a tacit agreement to disavow difference, to eschew thinking, and to stick together for apparent security. However in *So Much Water*, the illusory centre based on the pleasure principle begins to fall apart when confronted by reality.

I suspect that we could probably reach some agreement on what constitutes an intrapsychic “centre”—something along the lines of a stable, ongoing, independent and vital sense of identity. An interpersonal “centre” on the other hand is a bit more tricky. Does “clinging together for survival” constitute a sustainable centre? Can this kind of centre hold? And what is the cost of clinging together for survival, particularly if it requires acquiescence? This kind of clinging together in a quest to meet archaic needs may provide the illusion of a secure centre, but if there is a message in *So Much Water*, it is that such illusory centres both come at a high cost, and ultimately cannot hold.

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Paul McEvoy

pmmcevoy@iinet.net.au