

INTRODUCTION TO HAROLD SEARLES

Ann Glasser, Ph.D. & Terry Hanson, Ph.D. (2015)

Harold Searles was born in 1918 and grew up in Hancock, New York, a small town in upstate New York near the Berkshire Mountains, a particularly beautiful area of New York State. He attended [Cornell University](#) and later, [Harvard Medical School](#) before joining the US armed services as a psychiatrist in [World War II](#).^[1] After the war he began his psychoanalytic training at the Washington Psychoanalytic Institute and at the same time started working at the private psychiatric hospital, the [Chestnut Lodge](#), in [Maryland](#) where he remained for the next fifteen years working with chronic schizophrenic and other comparably ill, psychotic patients in 4, 5 day a week psychoanalytic psychotherapy. Searles was married for 60 years to the same woman with whom he had three children, two sons, both doctors, and a daughter who became a well-known actress in England.

Chestnut Lodge was the hospital where Frieda Fromm-Reichmann and a few other analysts representing the Interpersonal School of Psychoanalysis were working at the time Searles went to work there. Although he trained in a classically-oriented institute and in fact did his training analysis with a classical analyst, he was influenced very much by Frieda Fromm-Reichman, and always acknowledged his debt to her. Searles can safely be regarded as part of the Interpersonal School of Psychoanalysis, although he was so enormously creative in his own right that he cannot be identified exclusively with any one school of thought. He was quite interested in the Kleinian ideas around projective identification and often said that a letter he received from the great British Object Relations analyst, Donald Winnicott was his most prized professional possession.

Parenthetically, although Harry Stack Sullivan was working in the Washington area at the same time as Searles, Searles states that he was not drawn to him or his work. Perhaps what is most important to note here is that Searles was not a flag waver for any particular psychoanalytic theory, but always working to root his thinking in his clinical experience.

It was while Searles was at the Chestnut Lodge that he developed his groundbreaking ideas about working psychoanalytically with psychotic patients, ideas that were largely rejected and often treated very contemptuously by the organized psychoanalytic community of his day. At that time the psychoanalytic treatment of schizophrenics and other psychotic patients was regarded as hopeless. It was not until the late 70's and early 80's that Searles' work generally and specifically his ideas about countertransference became part of mainstream psychoanalytic thinking.

There are a few things worth highlighting in Searles' biography that seem important in understanding him and his work. The first is that he grew up in a small town in upper New York State where he felt very much a part of the life and people around him. He was the kind of young man in high school who was class president, played football, loved to play cards and dance, had lots of girlfriends and, perhaps because his father was a tailor, was known to be a very spiffy dresser.

Unlike so many of the leading analysts of his time who came to America during and after WWII, dislodged, often traumatically, from their homes and culture, and bringing with them the conflicts and schisms of the British and European psychoanalytic worlds, Searles took shape in small town America and only came gradually into the psychoanalytic community. Searles brought the sense of a functional community to the world of organized psychoanalysis. Even though he experienced a great deal of rejection

by the classical analytic community of his day and was outspoken in his anger at what he saw as their close mindedness, their dehumanizing of psychotic patients, he never split from the psychoanalytic world, never started a Searles school, for example, and by the 1980's had begun to be generally very well-received, his works published in major psychoanalytic journals. In fact he eventually became president of the Washington Psychoanalytic Institute and Association.

The second thing worth highlighting is how deeply Searles was attached to the physical beauty of the town and landscape where he grew up. As he writes,

Probably for every one who has found life to be more kindly than cruel, the land of his youth is a golden land; youth is such a golden time of life. Certainly for me the Catskill region of upstate New York possesses an undying enchantment, a beauty and an affirmation for life's goodness, which will be part of me as long as I live. For as far back as I can recall, I have felt that life's meaning resided not only in my relatedness with my mother and father and sister and other persons, but in relatedness with the land itself—the verdant or autumn-tapestried or stark and snow-covered hills, the uncounted lakes, the rivers.

Searles is explicit about how he transferred his attachment to the landscape of his youth to the Chestnut Lodge itself. In an interview with Robert Langs he said, *“Well, my feelings about Chestnut Lodge are so complex – and in a way so heavy, that it is very difficult for me to get into them with any strong hope of getting back out of them again, you see, at all soon. The word that came to mind is that I adored the place. I adored Chestnut Lodge. I was aware of being enormously attached to it and by it. I mean it includes a lot of the nonhuman environment. It is a beautiful place, very beautiful place.*

Not surprisingly Searles first book, *The Nonhuman Environment*, is a profound and highly original exploration of the attachments and meanings we find in the natural world.

Searles was deeply rooted, not only in the mold of his town and family, but in his emotional experience generally and how much use of it he made in his work. For Searles, unlike so many analytic therapists of all schools, his emotional experience includes his honesty about his own human feelings, whether it is his aggression, vanity, or omnipotence or even his depersonalized, animal, un-human feelings too as well as his deeply loving, maternal, hopeful ones. This is best conveyed in his description of a crucial moment in his training analysis. This is taken from a very intriguing book entitled *Intrapsychic and Interpersonal Dimensions of Treatment* where Searles undergoes an extensive interview by Robert Langs. In this quotation he responds to Langs' questions about his training analysis with enormous frankness.

I have a vivid memory of an experience of mine as a patient in analysis, more than twenty years ago, when I became conscious of a previously repressed hope entirely at odds with what I had felt to be my single-mindedly hoped for goal – namely, my parting from the analyst. From very early on in the analysis, my feelings about being there had oscillated between a conviction that I was on the verge of such overwhelming insanity that, as I frequently admonished the analyst, ‘You’d better get a bed ready for me at Chestnut Lodge’ (one measure of my true nuttiness being that I assumed that, for anyone so special as an analytic candidate, the Institute would arrange free treatment at that expensive place) and a conviction, on the other hand, that I was so manifestly and totally well that the analysis had now become absurdly superfluous.

At that time the incident in question occurred...I had long since settled into a consistent, unremitting bellyaching that the analyst was refusing to let me have done with this idiotically unnecessary analysis. He indicated the end of the session during which, for the nth time, I had been carping thus. I got up from the couch, as usual.

*The next thing I knew, I was walking toward him; he was standing by his chair as usual. As I walked the couple of steps to him, I did so suffused with romantic love of which I had been entirely unaware, but which had a quality of having been there all along. I embraced him and said, fondly, pleasingly, companionably, and above all romantically, 'Ernest, **when** are we going to get this analysis over with?' I referred to the analysis, here clearly as being in the nature of some inherently meaningless courtship-ritual which was being imposed from without upon both of us, and which we had to get behind us in order, at long last to consummate our fully-mutual love for one another. For all my gripingly impatient hope of getting the analysis over with, it was now immediately clear to me that I unconsciously had not the slightest intention of leaving him; my unconscious hope had been, on the contrary, for us full to possess one another.*

Because of his frankness, Searles is sometimes viewed as something of a wild analyst, but this is a serious misreading of him. Even though he could be obviously marvelously candid in his revelation of himself, and always, making use of his own emotional experience in his work, he was far from wild, in fact, a highly disciplined therapist and thinker whose goal it was always to focus on the patient and the patient's growth. Over the course of his career he wrote some 60 articles, collected in several books, including the interview book with Robert Langs,

SUGGESTED READINGS:

Searles wrote five books in the course of his career.

1. The Non-Human Environment in Normal Development and Schizophrenia.

Typical for Searles, in his first major work he takes on a topic largely avoided in traditional psychoanalytic thinking – our deep attachment to and identification with the natural and physical world around us.

2. Collected Papers on Schizophrenia and Related Subjects

This is Searles first collection of papers, reflecting his early, intensive work treating schizophrenics. While tremendously useful still in thinking about work with very disturbed mental states, it is also very much worth reading for the light it sheds on the therapeutic process with the full range of patients. This book contains one of Searles most well known and original articles, “Oedipal Love in the Countertransference.”

3. Countertransference and Related Subjects: Selected Papers

This is Searles second collection of papers and covers his later career after leaving Chestnut Lodge. The therapist’s own experience and use of this in the therapy work became his main focus in his work. This book contains three articles, chapters 8, 9, and 10, that outline Searles thinking about the phases and development of psychotherapy.

4. My Work With Borderline Patients

This is Seales final collection of papers, exploring many of the themes he has explored earlier but now organized around the particular issues of work with borderline personalities.

5. Intrapsychic and Interpersonal Dimensions of Treatment

This is written with Robert Langs, an interpersonal psychoanalyst who interviews Searles for this book. It provides a great deal of insight into Searles as a person and as an analyst, and is a fascinating account of the often contentious interaction between Langs and Searles.

BEGINNING READING:

A good place to start with Seales would be his articles describing the phases of psychotherapy in “Countertransference and Related Subjects.” This whole book is a good beginning, because it contains much of his mature thought. The article on Oedipal Love in “Collected Papers” is one of Searles’ most important contributions, and another good place to begin. His book with Robert Langs gives the best overview to Searles as a person and as a working psychoanalyst.

INTERNET RESOURCES:

1. Robert Young, an historian and psychoanalyst, has written a very good description of the importance of Searles work and its place in the psychoanalytic tradition. This is available at:
www.human-nature.com/rmyoung/papers/pap129h.html
2. A psychoanalyst who did her training analysis with Searles has written an intriguing account of her experience. This is available at:
www.apadivisions.org/division-39/publications/review/2012/04/...

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