



One and One-Half Friends: A Laingian Approach to Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*

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Abstract

Katherine Paterson's beloved children's story, *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977), explores the relationship of a young boy named Jess to his family, to his best friend Leslie, and to the nature of tragedy. Paterson demonstrates that learning to cope with senseless accidents is a part of growing up, but that learning to cope does not mean changing or losing our sense of identity. This paper, using a psychoanalytic Laingian approach to Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*, reveals Jess' relationships to himself and to others and how his interactions and perceptions influence the development of these relationships. Laing's theory demonstrates that Jess' character development parallels that of an infant. The distinction of self and other leads to the formation of multiple personalities at various stages of development, and, in the case of lack of affirmation from others and/or from the self, these personalities may never develop to maturity- whether through abandonment, suppression, or abrupt changes in how one perceives and/or relates to others. Jess' self-protection tactics, such as dehumanization, prevent him from forming positive and lasting relationships, which in turn perpetuates his ontological insecurity. It is only Leslie's interventional friendship and mother-bond that gives him a foundation on which to build his identity. When the foundation is ripped away, his identity collapses, but Jess now has the tools he needs to rebuild himself without her.

Keywords: Friendship, Laingian Analysis, Identity, Self, Other.

Katherine Paterson's beloved children's story, *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977), explores the relationship of a young boy named Jess with his family, with his best friend Leslie, and with the nature of tragedy. The success of Paterson's story, which was adapted into a film by her own son in 2007, seems to derive from her unapologetically honest and unpatronizing representation of life—and, of course, death. Paterson demonstrates that learning to cope with senseless accidents is a part of growing up, but that learning to cope does not mean changing or losing our sense of identity. This paper, using a psychoanalytic Laingian approach to Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*, reveals Jess' relationships to himself and to others, and how his interactions and perceptions influence the development of these relationships.

The psychoanalytic approach attempts to determine “patterns of behavior that are destructive in some way” (Tyson 2015, p. 12). One may or may not recognize the existence of these patterns: “Our unconscious desires not to recognize or change our destructive behaviors—because we have formed our identities around them...—are served by our defenses...Defenses include *selective perception, selective memory, denial, avoidance, displacement, and projection*” (p. 15). These listed defenses, in place to protect the behavioral

patterns to which one has accustomed oneself, are found in the works of R. D. Laing, a Scottish psychiatrist whose specialty was schizophrenia. In particular, Laing explored defense mechanisms such as dehumanization, fragmentation, and masking—themes which feature repeatedly in *Bridge to Terabithia*. But to establish the context and foundation for this textual analysis, one needs an outline of Laing's theory.

Laing's first book, *The Divided Self*, published in 1969, "thematized the problems of *ontological insecurity* experienced by people whose needs, feelings, and experiences are consistently invalidated in early childhood" (Burston 2000, p. 3). Ontological insecurity literally means that a person's very *being* is insecure—that is, there is no firm concept of identity, particularly in relationships with others. An example of this would be an infant who has not yet recognized that she is a separate being from her mother. Because he was a psychiatrist, part of Laing's objectives in the creation of his theory was to uncover a means of curing, or at least treating, his patients, particularly child patients. One objective:

...articulated forcefully in *The Divided Self* (chs. 8 and 9) is the reduction or elimination of 'false guilt.' By false guilt, Laing meant (1) a sense of worthlessness or self-loathing occasioned by a patient's inability or refusal to live up to the expectations of others, to be what others say the patient really is (or ought to be), and (2) a more pervasive and diffuse sense of guilt at merely being in the world, brought on by routine parental inability (or refusal) to affirm the child's authentic sense of self. Conversely, true guilt emanates from the patient's inability to actualize his or her innate potential for authentic experience and expression—that is, from the failure to be oneself on one's own terms. (Burston 2000, pp. 39–40)

In consideration of *false* guilt, certainly category no. (1) can be construed as gender roles, as the burden of responsibilities on older siblings, on students, and children whose parents expect them to be or become someone or thing in general. The category numbered (2), in contrast, may be an extension or a more severe form of the first category—when a parent continues to burden a child with expectations or demands without ever acknowledging or encouraging the child's efforts, it can lead to a state in which the child feels paralyzed, caught in a double-bind, unable to do or say anything because that would draw negative attention or repercussions. *True* guilt, however, may or may not involve parental or adult-figure affirmation—it stems from an inability of the self to recognize his or her own potentiality as an individual.

Further, an individual is a contingent being. No person develops into a mature, intelligent adult alone: it takes some relationship and interaction with others in order to develop a sense of identity. More importantly, though, this development of identity tends to yield at least two distinct personalities. That is, one will act in a particular manner when interacting with others, and act in a different manner when alone, or even with a different group of others. In other words, inner self and outer self are distinct, and because there are no perfect inner-self outer-self matches, Laing sees all people as "existing somewhere along a continuum of experience from at least slightly split (schizoid) to severely fragmented (schizophrenic)... [T]he source of severe division between inner and outer self [is] caused by the relationships—particularly the earliest formative relationships—between self and other" (Laing 2017). During interactions with others, a child learns to behave in certain manners, especially as a means of self-protection. For example, a child whose parents shame bodily functions learns to conceal these functions, while one whose parents celebrate bodily functions learns to flaunt them. From there, the child must learn to gauge and monitor the tolerance of people outside the family, not to mention any developments or changes of attitudes within the family, creating a division of self in which the child moderates acknowledgment of bodily functions depending on the presence of others. More specific ideas like dehumanization and fragmentation will be applied

directly to the following analysis of *Bridge to Terabithia*.

For superstitious readers, *Bridge to Terabithia*'s thirteen chapters are indication enough that the author is up to no good and that the reader is in for a bad time, but the intention behind the book is important: Paterson says that she "wrote the book because my son David's best friend was struck and killed by lightning, and I had to make sense of that tragedy. I couldn't bring Lisa back from the dead. I couldn't even comfort my child, so I did what I could do and that's write a story" (Trierweiler 2007). The book chronicles approximately a year in the life of a fifth-grade boy named Jesse "Jess" Aarons, who trains himself over the summer to become the fastest runner out of all the boys at his rural school, purportedly to make his father proud, but more likely to distract his disapproving father from the fact that Jess hopes for a future career in the arts. His hopes bite the dust as a newcomer, a girl named Leslie Burke, proves herself to be a veritable Atalanta (Encyclopædia Britannica 2019) in the daily recess races. Despite his initial jealousy and resentment of her, she and Jess become fast and inseparable friends. One of their favorite games is imagining a land named Terabithia, over which together they rule as monarchs; to get there, they swing across a creek on an old rope swing. While using Terabithia as a sanctuary from their everyday burdens of school, bullies, and family, they must also continue to operate within those everyday circles—thus Terabithia becomes both a place of refuge and a war room in which battle plans and strategies are developed, particularly in the fight against the "giant" bully, Janice. Although the springtime rains come, and the creek swells dangerously, the pair continues to cross over into Terabithia, even though Jess is afraid. When the opportunity to accompany his beloved music teacher to D.C. arises, Jess goes, forgetting to tell Leslie and forgetting to ask Miss Edmunds whether Leslie could join them on the trip. When he returns later that day, it is to find his stony family in the house, waiting to tell him that Jess' body had been found downstream—because anywhere that Leslie went, Jess was sure to go. Leslie was drowned, the rope having at last given way. At first, Jess' denial of the event, his incapability to accept or absorb the pain of the impact of the news, protects him, but soon enough, he must come to terms with the fact that his best friend is gone, suddenly and tragically, and figure out who he is without her. To reach his bereft kingdom, Jess builds a bridge across the narrowest part of the creek. In the end, Jess finds some peace by choosing to fill the void Leslie left with the coronation of his younger sister May Belle as the new queen of Terabithia.

Throughout the story, Jess struggles with his identity. From the start, the reader is made aware that Jess "had to be the fastest [runner]—not one of the fastest or next to the fastest, but the fastest. The very best" (Paterson 1977, p. 2), indicating that he is not yet the fastest, or even known to be a runner. Indeed, "[e]ver since he'd been in first grade he'd been that 'crazy little kid that draws all the time'" (p. 4). Clearly, this is an undesirable perception of self. Laing (1971b) proposes that:

Shame, rather than guilt, appears to arise when a person finds himself condemned to an identity as the complement of another he wishes to repudiate, but cannot. It is difficult to establish a consistent identity for oneself—that is, to see oneself consistently in the same way—if definitions of oneself by others are inconsistent or mutually exclusive. (p. 87)

In other words, Jess seems aware that being the fastest runner and the crazy little kid that draws all the time are mutually exclusive identities, at least in the eyes of others. His goal is to replace the latter with the former, establishing each identity as a distinct personality from which he is able to choose. The fastest runner would overshadow and effectively erase the crazy little kid.

Of course, Jess continues to draw in private, early in the mornings before his chores. He draws "crazy animals with problems—for some reason he liked to put his beasts into impossible fixes" (Paterson 1977, p. 12), such as a hippopotamus walking off a cliff. These

animals and their predicaments reflect his own experiences and feelings—he has not walked off a cliff, surely, but Jess feels, perhaps, as though he is inescapably falling, or standing on a precipice. The drawings also dehumanize him: if Jess identifies with the hippo, then he does not identify with himself, a boy—and thus he is not a boy. What is more, penciled hippos falling off penciled cliffs do not actually get hurt; they do not really feel pain or worry or fear. Despite his conviction to distance himself from the identity of the ‘crazy little kid who draws all the time,’ Jess doodles in class as well. Invariably, a classmate spots him at work, leading to an interaction—or, rather, confrontation—in which Jess attempts to protect himself: Gary Fulcher looms over his desk in an attempt to see the drawing, which Jess covers with an arm. Gary nevertheless persists, prompting Jess to cover the paper with both arms, and when the former insists, he finally brings “his sneaker heel crashing down on Gary Fulcher’s toe” (p. 28). Jess is so desperate to dissociate himself from the perception that he is strange and artistic that he is willing to risk punishment from the teacher for his violent outburst.

When he becomes king of Terabithia, he does manage to distance himself from that perception, but by embracing his creativity rather than denying it. The change first appears when Jess and Leslie encounter the rope which they use to cross the creek. Following Leslie, he swings on it, “drifting like a fat white lazy cloud back and forth across the blue” (49). This is another instance of dehumanization (he is a cloud, not a boy), but more importantly, it is laden with deeper meaning and foreshadowing. The metaphor recalls William Wordsworth’s lyric poem “I wandered lonely as a cloud” (Wordsworth 1807) (See Appendix), in which the narrator takes refuge in the memory of his encounter with the golden vale of daffodils. For the children, not only is Terabithia itself a refuge from everyday life, but so are their memories and fantasies of it. For Jess, Terabithia is his chance to recreate himself how he wants, without witnesses, aside from his co-creator and enabler, Leslie: “He’d like to be a ruler of something. Even something that wasn’t real” (Paterson 1977, p. 50). The only time Jess has control over how people (real or imagined) perceive him is in Terabithia, and as such he experiences a transformation in which he becomes “taller and stronger and wiser in that mysterious land [Terabithia]” (p. 59). This is the identity Jess most embraces, despite his uncertainty regarding regal traditions and his lack of eloquence. Yet the rising water of the creek, swollen with rains, reflects his own rising anxiety. But he forces himself to follow Leslie across the swinging rope, even though “his mind hung back, wanting to cling to the crab apple tree the way Joyce Ann [his baby sister] might cling to Momma’s skirt” (p. 115). Jess’ hesitancy to follow Leslie indicates that he is slowly distancing himself from her, or wants to distance himself, out of fear of separation. Laing (1969) writes that:

A firm sense of one’s own autonomous identity is required in order that one may be related as one human being to another. Otherwise, any and every relationship threatens the individual with loss of identity. One form this takes can be called engulfment. In this the individual dreads relatedness as such, with anyone or anything, or, indeed, even with himself, because his uncertainty about the stability of his autonomy lays him open to the dread lest in any relationship he will lose his autonomy and identity... The main maneuver used to preserve identity under pressure from the dread of engulfment is isolation. (pp. 45–46)

Acknowledging his fear gives Jess a sense of dread, particularly due to internalized ideas about gender roles: boys are supposed to be brave; moreover, kings must be brave in order to earn their kingdoms. Jess is afraid that he “was obviously not worthy to be king of Terabithia. Whoever heard of a king who was scared of tall trees and a little bit of water?” (Paterson 1977, p. 118). The internalization of these gender roles leads him to feel true guilt and, an inability to self-actualize due to his own fears. Towards the end of the story, however, Jess comes to realize that before Leslie’s arrival, “he had been a nothing—a stupid, weird little kid who drew

funny pictures and chased around a cow field trying to act big—trying to hide a whole mob of foolish little fears running riot inside his gut” (p. 160). It is not Terabithia which transforms him, but Leslie, “who had taken him from the cow pasture into Terabithia and turned him into a king” (p. 160). Leslie encourages Jess to practice his art, to exercise not only his legs but his imagination. She is the fulcrum around which Jess pivots his identities in his pursuit of completion.

While he searches for and develops his own identity, Jess also explores and redefines his relationships with and perceptions of those around him. “Every relationship implies a definition of self by other and other by self. This complementarity can be central or peripheral, have greater or less dynamic significance at different periods of one’s life” (Laing 1971b, p. 86). Moreover, the significance we attach to others and our experiences of them may sometimes determine “[t]he way we conduct ourselves in relation to one another and to the world” (Laing 1982, p. 132). For example, because Jess attaches more significance to his paternal relationship than his maternal or sororal relationships, he is more conscientious of his father’s wishes and how to act reverently towards him, whereas he often ignores his mother and is rude and sullen to his sisters. Aside from a person’s identity, which is formed by relationships with others, behavior often derives from one’s perceptions and judgements of others’ expectations. Laing (1971b) states that:

...we cannot give an undistorted account of ‘a person’ without giving an account of his relation with others. Even an account of one person cannot afford to forget that each person is always *acting* upon others and *acted upon* by others. The others are there also. No one acts or experiences in a vacuum. The person whom we describe, and over whom we theorize, *is not the only agent in his ‘world’*. How he perceives and acts towards the others, how they perceive and act towards him, how he perceives them as perceiving him, how they perceive him as perceiving them, are all aspects of ‘the situation’. They are all pertinent to understanding one person’s participation in it. (pp. 81–82)

One aspect of Jess’ perception of others, particularly of the female characters, is his tendency to dehumanize them through the use of metaphors and animalistic/static verbs. According to Laing, the dehumanization of the other is also a means of self-protection. If the other person is not human, then they are not equal; animals and inanimate objects are lesser than human, which places the human in a position of power or control over them.

At the beginning of the story, Jess primarily interacts with his younger sister May Belle, who worships him (Paterson 1977, p. 2). This is not a dehumanization of the girl herself, but places Jess in a higher, godlike position as the object of worship. He also compares their cow Miss Bessie’s eyes to those of May Belle (p. 3), which emphasizes not the humanity of the cow, but the docile herd-like mentality of his sister. This quality is further highlighted in another instance in which he contemplates showing his hippopotamus drawing to her, knowing that “he would have to explain the joke, but once he did, she would laugh like a live audience on TV” (p. 14). Here the live audience operates as an abstract concept, an anonymous entity whose quality is ascribed to someone Jess knows and interacts with personally, a comparison which serves to distance himself from the girl.

While his sister is relegated to the position of an apostle, Jess uses a different tactic to make himself superior to his music teacher, Miss Edmunds. She is the only adult who encourages his art, and her kindness leads Jess to assume that “she thought he was the best...a genuine kind of best” (p. 14). This is Jess’ perception of Miss Edmunds’ perception of him, which is interesting given his struggle to accept an identity as an artist. But the idea that Miss Edmunds believes he’s the bees’ knees gives him a sense of power. His fixation on her, however, goes beyond her supportive attitude: “he saw her as a beautiful wild creature who had

been caught for a moment in that dirty old cage of a schoolhouse, perhaps by mistake. But he hoped, he prayed, she'd never get loose and fly away" (p. 15), and "it was she who was the diamond" (p. 17). His dehumanization of her not only emphasizes her beauty, especially of her soul, but underscores the idea that she can be captured, owned. Miss Edmunds is caught in the school, where one can visit her like a tiger in the zoo, and she is a diamond, which one can buy, own, give, or sell as one wishes. When she invites him to the capitol with her because he would appreciate the art museums, one might argue that Jess believes his own skills as an artist have retained her and made her as fixated on him as he is on her.

In contrast to both May Belle and Miss Edmunds, who are compared to rather positive images and who become more "human" as the story progresses, a third girl named Janice Avery is consistently and negatively dehumanized. She is a prominent bully in Jess' grade, and features heavily as the main enemy in the Terabithian war room. Of interest to note is that Jess and Janice have the same initials: J. A. The coincidence may suggest a sort of kinship or similarity between the two, especially in light of Leslie's tentative friendship with her, despite Jess' desperation to dissociate himself from her through his defense mechanism. In contrast to May Belle's cow, which is the familiar and beloved Miss Bessie, Janice is compared to "some dumb cow" (p. 47), and to a "female gorilla" (p. 63)—the latter having a strange ring to it, since the gorilla's gender seems irrelevant. In Terabithia, after battling the imaginary giants and retiring to the war room for further plans, Jess and Leslie affirm to each other that "the real giant in their lives was Janice Avery" (p. 61), and accordingly scheme to defeat her at school. But after the plan goes horribly awry, transforming Janice into the victim and Jess and Leslie into the bullies, Jess reflects that "Janice Avery had given him nothing but trouble, and now he was feeling responsible for her—like one of the Burkes' timber wolves or beached whales" (p. 92). Although he recognizes the need to make things right with her, he dehumanizes her still in order to feel more in control of the circumstances: the timber wolves are not endangered through any of Jess' actions, and similarly, Janice (who is not a girl, but a wolf or a whale) is not in a lower social position due to any intervention on his part. His defense mechanism allows him to deny any responsibility for Janice's pain itself, but rather paints him in a heroic light in which he willingly takes the responsibility onto himself as a wildlife activist would.

After meeting Leslie, Jess' dehumanization of the female characters decreases (except for Janice) and falls away altogether. But at first, he also attempts to assert his superiority as a human over Leslie. As the only boy in-between four sisters and whose father works away from home, he sometimes feels "so lonely among all these females" (p. 18). Despite this, he does not seem to pursue friendships with the other boys in his class; rather, he reaches out to Leslie, the new neighbor. Jess' method of distancing Leslie is interesting: he identifies her as androgynous. Jess cannot tell the gender of the figure he meets sitting on the fence, "whether it was a girl or a boy" (p. 22). Using the pronoun "it" rather than saying "he or she" or "the person" dehumanizes her from the start. Androgyny is a subversion of gender expectations. Jess expects the person to be either male or female, and only after determining which can he judge her through the application of internalized gender norms. But because Leslie does not wear any identifying markers of her gender, Jess' judgment of her is suspended, leaving him in a powerless position: the use of "it" is an attempt to reclaim and assert power over the mysterious figure. Even when she offers her name, Leslie, he recognizes that it is unisex, further confounding his attempts to identify and impose order. Jess does not seem to realize that his own name is unisex as well, and only his outward display of gender norms prevents his own androgyny. He possibly recalls this androgyny later: "He couldn't help turning to watch [Leslie running home]. She ran as though it was her nature. **It** reminded him of the flight of wild ducks in the autumn" (p. 36). The use of "it" [bolded by me] in the third sentence could refer to either Leslie's running or Leslie herself, especially considering Jess' propensity towards dehumanization.

Jess also tends to take notice of when other characters wear masks, but, interestingly, each of the three explicit mentions of masking takes on a different connotation depending on how he perceives each character. In school, Leslie wears a “mask of perfection” (p. 56), which she uses to disguise her daydreaming from the teacher—a mask Jess himself does not have. When Momma complains that out of her five children only Ellie cared whether Momma lived or died, “Ellie smiled like a plastic angel first at Jess and then at Brenda, who glared back” (p. 81). One would assume that a plastic angel’s face would appear as a mask of perfection like Leslie’s, but because Jess does not have a good relationship with his older sister, this mask takes on a very negative aspect, as well as dehumanizes her. The third mention of masking is in reference to Janice, after Leslie and Jess dupe her with a fake love letter: “There was a crack in the old hippo hide” (p. 65). Not only does this dehumanize Janice by insinuating that she is a hippo, but it suggests that her mask is imperfect because she is lesser. While Leslie’s mask is perfect, Ellie’s is plastic, which can break under enough pressure, and worse still is Janice’s hippo hide, which cannot be anything but hippo hide, and thus cannot adapt to new situations—instead it can be easily wounded and scarred. Considering Jess could relate to his hippo drawing from the beginning, one might assume that his “mask” is similar, if not identical, to Janice’s.

As for similarities between Jess and Leslie, there are few except for their potentiality as androgyny, which was previously pointed out. Rather than being likeminded, they are complements of a whole: “Leslie was more than [Jess’] friend. She was his other, more exciting self- his way to Terabithia and all the worlds beyond” (p. 59). Interestingly, rather than attempting to *become* Leslie or to subsume her, she retains simultaneously her own identity as Leslie, but Jess sees this Leslie as another of *his own* personalities, like the artist and the fastest runner (which she is, rather than himself). He believes that “Leslie belonged to him. More to him than anyone in the world” (p. 145). Further, it is only through this personality of Leslie that Jess has access to Terabithia, reducing Leslie to a bridge: “Jess tried going to Terabithia alone, but it was no good. It needed Leslie to make the magic. He was afraid he would destroy everything by trying to force the magic on his own” (p. 83). Because only her presence, her imagination, allows him to take refuge in Terabithia, her death is an abandonment:

Leslie had failed him. She went and died just when he needed her the most...She had tricked him. She had made him leave his old self behind and come into her world, and then before he was really at home in it but too late to go back, she had left him stranded there. (pp. 145–46)

Once Jess had made her the fulcrum around which he pivoted his identity, her absence causes a breakdown of self-knowledge. Without her support, he is ontologically insecure, unable to actualize himself, unable to control and balance his world. When he and Leslie created Terabithia, they had looked over their new world and, “[I]ike God in the Bible, they...found it very good” (p. 51). This representation combines them into one omnipotent entity, a figure whose existence is impossible without the imaginative faculties of both children. As this God, “they owned the world and no enemy, Gary Fulcher, Wanda Kay Moore, Janice Avery, Jess’s own fears and insufficiencies, nor any of the foes whom Leslie imagined attacking Terabithia, could ever really defeat them” (p. 52). Without Leslie, this balanced ownership is impossible.

An important interaction between Leslie and Jess occurs after their befriending of Janice Avery, their bully *cum* victim. After speaking with Janice in the girls’ restroom, Leslie declares to Jess that she has “one and one-half friends” (p. 97). Jess assumes, of course, that he is the one and Janice is the one-half: “To be able to be Leslie’s one whole friend in the world as she was his—he couldn’t help being satisfied about that” (p. 98). Consider instead that Jess is the one-half friend. He is unable to act, particularly in Terabithia, without her, while Leslie and Janice autonomously move throughout the story (though of course Janice’s role is much

more limited as an antagonist).

In Laingian theory, and in psychoanalytic theory in general, the family dynamic is very important (Tyson 2015, p. 13). This has been discussed in fewer details elsewhere in the essay, but Laing (1971a) takes pains to outline the familial relationship and self-identity. He explains that:

The child is born into a family which is the product of the operations of human beings already in this world. It is a system mediated through sight, sound, taste, smell, touch, pain and pleasure, heat and cold, an ocean in which the child quickly learns to swim. But of this series, *relations, not simply objects*, are internalized and construed for significance. The family described here is a group mode characterized by co-inherence. Some families are run more on organization-business lines; some are institutions. From morning to night, the one person metamorphoses as he passes from one group mode to another; from family to bus queue, to business, to friends at lunch, to Old Boys' Reunion, before retiring to family. Transference entails carrying over one metamorphosis, based on being 'in' and having inside oneself one group mode of sociality, into another...The person who moves through different pluralities in a pluralistic society functions in different modes, even simultaneously, while each internal set of modal structures undergoes transformation different in type, phasing, tempo, etc. (pp. 11–12)

In other words, a person is constantly changing, monitoring their environments and relationships in order to moderate their own behavior, attempting to either conform to or subvert others' expectations or perceptions. Jess is no exception, and Laing's point is illustrated in Jess' interactions with his own family versus his interactions with Leslie's family.

Neither of the mothers, Mrs. Aarons and Mrs. Burke, feature very prominently in the story. Jess' mother's role as housewife reduces her role to supervisor and delegator of tasks, which Jess resents because as the only boy, on him falls the lot of the outside chores such as milking. She is unsupportive of his dreams of being the fastest runner, calling him lazy when he returns from running without having finished his morning chores (Paterson 1977, p. 9). Despite her few appearances, the reader understands that her constant presence at the house is implicit. Mrs. Burke, an author, appears more seldom and is absent-minded and airy—the antithesis of the down-to-earth, constantly moving Mrs. Aarons. Jess wonders “what it would be like to have a mother whose stories were inside her head instead of marching across the television screen all day long” (p. 112), indicating that he does not understand the difference between a family with time and money like Leslie's, and a family with neither like his own. Jess rarely speaks to his own mother, and only greets Mrs. Burke in the story once.

The paternal relationship is much more important in *Bridge to Terabithia*. Mr. Aarons has strong expectations of and for his son. It is clear he knows what those expectations are: to be a traditional, responsible man, for one, but whether he wants Jess to go to university or to inherit the farm or some other future career is unmentioned. When in the first grade Jess told his father he wanted to be an artist, his father was not pleased (p. 14). When Jess completes his chores later than usual, his father points it out to him, that being “the only thing his father said directly to him all evening” (p. 20). The lack of communication, spoken or tactile, translates as a lack of love for Jess, who is jealous of his younger sisters: “It made Jess ache inside to watch his dad grab the little ones to his shoulder, or lean down and hug them. It seemed to him that he had been thought too big for that since the day he was born” (pp. 19–20). For Christmas, Jess' father gives him toy cars and a track, which do not work well, and parallel their rocky relationship: “the silly cars kept falling off at the curves until his father was cursing at them

with impatience. Jess wanted it to be OK. He wanted so much for his dad to be proud of his present, the way he, Jess, had been proud of the puppy [he'd gotten for Leslie]" (p. 80). The cars, as opposed to the dolls and makeup and clothes for his sisters, are traditionally boys' gifts, reinforcing Mr. Aarons' idea of what his son should like, even though the gift falls flat and creates a sense of false guilt in Jess.

Unlike the taciturn Mr. Aarons, Mr. Burke is very outgoing and communicative. When remodeling the living room of their home, he enlists the help of his daughter, who loves being needed by her father. She tells Jess at recess that she is learning to understand her father, much to Jess' dismay: "It had never occurred to Jess that parents were meant to be understood... There was something weird about a grown man wanting to be friends with his own child... Jess's feelings about Leslie's father poked up like a canker sore... It even poisoned what time he did have with Leslie" (p. 86). But his jealousy is abated somewhat when Mr. Burke welcomes his help as well. "Jess found he was really useful to [Leslie's father], not a nuisance to be tolerated or set out on the porch like P.T. [the dog]. / 'You're amazing,' Bill would say" (p. 87). To Jess, Mr. Burke is fatherlier than his own father, who works out of town and is rarely home, unlike Mr. Burke, who enjoys spending time with the children. Moreover, because Leslie is another of Jess' personalities, this makes Mr. Burke a second father, giving Jess the opportunity to repair his feelings towards Leslie as well as gain support in his own endeavors, such as art.

Leslie's death does not only change Jess: it changes the dynamics of Jess' relationships with both the Aaronses and the Burkes. Where before Leslie's father had offered Jess liberation, he now confines him: "Bill came over to him and put his arms around him as though he had been Leslie instead of himself. Bill held him close, so that a button on his sweater was pressing painfully into Jess's forehead, but as uncomfortable as he was, Jess didn't move" (p. 144). Here Jess recognizes that he is a distinct person from Leslie. Now that she as a personality is no longer available to him, her father's comforting gesture is misconstrued as interpreting Jess himself as a stand-in for Leslie, in the same way Jess had viewed Leslie and her family as a replacement for his own. The discomfort causes Jess to distance himself from both the Burkes and his own immediate family. The Aaronses seem incapable of voicing their concern for him: "His father leaned down the table and put his big hand on top of Jess's hand. He gave his wife a quick, troubled look. But she just stood there, her eyes full of pain, saying nothing" (p. 139). While his mother makes him his favorite pancake breakfast and his father puts his hand on his shoulder (p. 138), these small gestures of love and of comfort are not enough to affirm to Jess that he will be whole again, will be able to become and remain himself once his other half is torn away from him. Affirmation of his feelings and self-worth comes only after he runs to the creek to escape the wake at the Burkes' home, where his father follows him:

His father pulled Jess over on his lap as though he were Joyce Ann [and comforted him], stroked his hair without speaking... Finally, his father said, "Hell, ain't it?" It was the kind of thing Jess could hear his father saying to another man. He found it strangely comforting, and it made him bold. (p. 147)

When Jess declares the unfairness of it all, his father nods to show he understands. This reaching out sparks a connection between them so that Jess too can come to understand his father as Leslie had revealed in understanding hers. Jess is afraid that "he had hurt Bill by running away this morning. He wanted, too, to know that Bill didn't blame him for anything. But it was not the kind of question he could put into words" (p. 148). The relationship between Jess and the Burkes technically remains unresolved at the end of the novel, as the Burkes move away; however, Jess' familial relationship seems greatly improved through his self-actualization stemming from his father's reaching out, his own acceptance of Leslie's death, and his building of the bridge to reach Terabithia.

It may be more accurate to say that Jess *replaced* the bridge to Terabithia. Throughout the story, Leslie serves as the means of reaching, or the bridge to, Terabithia, rather than the rope itself. Jess' attachment is to her *through* the rope. Laing (1982) writes that: "Attachment may be felt positively or negatively as being tied to the other by something or other. The tie may be pleasant or unpleasant, desired or undesired, welcome or imposed, two-way or one-way" (p. 131). Further, "Whenever this feeling [of being tied] exists within an **intact** reciprocal bond, no issue of an abysmal difference can arise" (p. 132). The keyword is 'intact': once the rope has been severed, the attachment is gone unless one is able to find a new means of relating or bonding to the object.

The rope demonstrates strong umbilical imagery. Jess "couldn't escape the feeling that one must enter Terabithia only by the prescribed entrance [the rope]" (Paterson 1977, p. 76), which parallels a fetus' need for the umbilical cord for development, and without which one cannot enter the world. Other images support the concept of Jess as a fetus, with Leslie serving as the mother and the rope as the umbilical cord connecting them: Leslie is always the first to swing across the rope, and Jess follows; in cases where Jess attempts to cross on his own, he is unable to enter Terabithia; and most significantly, after Leslie's death and the severing of the rope, Jess attempts to flee, but his father catches up:

Behind him came the baripity of the pickup, but he couldn't turn around. He tried to run faster, but his father passed him and stopped the pickup just ahead, then jumped out and ran back. **He picked Jess up in his arms as though he were a baby.** For the first few seconds Jess kicked and struggled against the strong arms. Then Jess gave himself over to the numbness that was buzzing to be let out from a corner of his brain. (p. 132)

The bolded line [emphasized by me] gives the scene a post-birth tone. Jess is forcefully separated from his mother, and must learn to not only cope with reality, but learn to recognize that he is a distinct entity from the mother and form relationships between himself and others.

The separation is a means of fracturing one's identity, which Jess certainly experiences. Throughout the story, there are references to and images of fracturing, and these are almost exclusively used between Jess and his sister May Belle. For example, May Belle tells Jess that he has to "beat her [Janice Avery] up into a million pieces" (p. 62), and at the end, she appears again after following him to the creek and finding herself stuck halfway across the makeshift bridge: "A scream shattered the quietness" (p. 153). Most significantly, Jess muses that "Sometimes it seemed to him that his life was delicate as a dandelion. One little puff from any direction, and it was blown to bits" (p. 99). This reinforces his ontological insecurity, his identities still in development and without external support or affirmation. For example, just when he was beginning to form an identity as an artist, his father shot down his dream, and Jess scrambled to create a new and more suitable one, hoping that this time it would be 'right'.

Before concluding this essay, I wanted to discuss one last passage that exemplifies many of the terms and concepts Laing uses in his works. At the beginning of the school year, the teacher Mrs. Meyers assigns a prompt about students' favorite hobbies, and proudly reads Leslie's aloud. Jess' perception of the reading is as follows:

Mrs. Meyers' sharp voice cut Leslie's sentences into funny little phrases, but even so, the power of Leslie's words drew Jess with her under the dark water. Suddenly he could hardly breathe. Suppose you went under and your mask filled all up with water and you couldn't get to the top in time? He was choking and sweating. He tried to push down his panic. This was Leslie Burke's favorite hobby. Nobody would make up scuba diving to be their favorite hobby if it wasn't so. That meant Leslie did it a lot. That she wasn't

scared of going deep, deep down in a world of no air and little light. Lord, he was such a coward. How could he be all in a tremble just listening to Mrs. Myers read about it? He was worse a baby than Joyce Ann. His dad expected him to be a man. And here he was letting some girl who wasn't even ten yet scare the liver out of him by just telling what it was like to sight-see underwater. Dumb, dumb, dumb. (p. 43)

Despite the teacher's "sharp voice" that fragments and reduces the "power of Leslie's words" (p. 43), Jess can feel his mask, his outward self, being penetrated by them, reinforcing Leslie's near omnipotence. Aside from the literary foreshadowing of drowning, one can also see the womb imagery: as a female, Leslie's reproductive capabilities do not frighten her, but for a male, this mysterious, deep "world of no air and little light" (p. 43) is terrifying. His false guilt leads him to compare himself to a baby, a denial of self-worth worsened by his perception of his father's unrealistic expectations of him.

Laing's theory demonstrates that Jess' character development parallels that of an infant, but the point of the essay is not to infantilize him. Instead, the distinction of self and other leads to the formation of multiple personalities at various stages of development, and in the case of lack of affirmation from others and/or from the self, these personalities may never develop to maturity—whether through abandonment, suppression, or abrupt changes in how one perceives and/or relates to others. Jess' self-protection tactics such as dehumanization prevent him from forming positive and lasting relationships, which in turn perpetuates his ontological insecurity. It is only Leslie's interventional friendship and mother-bond that gives him a foundation on which to build his identity. When the foundation is ripped away, his identity collapses, but Jess now has the tools he needs to rebuild himself without her.

Appendix:

"I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" by William Wordsworth

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed- and gazed- but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,

They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils. (Wordsworth 1807)

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Bio-note

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