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"YOUR FATHER'S CRIMES":
THE FAMILY CYCLE OF DYSFUNCTION
IN THE WORKS OF W. D. SNODGRASS

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of English

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

University of Nebraska at Omaha

by

Eve R. Hermanson

Summer, 1987

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College,
University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts, University
of Nebraska at Omaha.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study could not have begun without my first introduction to Snodgrass by Dr. John McKenna, whose thoughtful guidance as Supervisory Committee Chairman was indispensable. I also appreciate the valuable counsel and advice of Committee Members Mr. Richard Duggin and Dr. Bruce Baker. This project was supported by the continuing encouragement of my husband, Dan Donlan, and by my own enthusiasm for the authenticity in the works of W. D. Snodgrass.

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Chapter I

Introduction to Snodgrass's Theme and Speaker

Never before has society so imminently faced the break up of its basic cell--the traditional family--or in greater numbers than in the last half of the twentieth century. Like other art forms, poetry reflects the changing concerns of society, and when Heart's Needle appeared in 1959, critics praised W. D. Snodgrass for the honest and unsentimental sequence of poems about his difficulty as a newly divorced father. Without a doubt, the effect of divorce on parent/child relationships becomes an increasingly significant theme to growing numbers of people as divorce becomes increasingly accepted and widespread in our culture; however, loss of a child through divorce is only one aspect of damaged family relationships that Snodgrass examines. A broader view of Snodgrass's poetry about intimacy, including selections from Heart's Needle, Remains, and After Experience, reveals his concern with the larger theme of the self-perpetuating, cyclic nature of family dysfunction.

William Heyen points out that Snodgrass's speaker is "caught up in, and not a little stifled by, what seem to be inexorable cycles of existence" (353); indeed, Snodgrass frequently uses cyclic imagery, which

emphasizes the almost inevitable nature of family dysfunction. The destructive pattern perpetuates itself in the following manner: In the first place, to the child, his parents' dysfunctional behavior (such as alcoholism, physical or emotional abuse) seems to be the normal way of coping with emotional stress; next, if the child learns no other methods of emotionally coping, as he approaches adulthood he will very likely repeat his parent's behavioral patterns; and finally, if he cannot break the cycle by taking action to change the destructive behavior, chances are that the adult will pass on his inherited relational difficulties to his own children. As he explores the cyclical effect of family dysfunction, Snodgrass reveals the existence of this very pattern in the life of the speaker.

According to Robert Phillips's perception, "Snodgrass the man" is "a character in a drama viewed from afar" by "Snodgrass the poet," suggesting a differentiation between the fictional speaker's persona and the actual writer's personality (65). The distinction between "Snodgrass the poet" and the speaker of the poems--like the artist and the art--is made for the sake of the most objective evaluation of the poetry. It is true, as Heyen points out, that Snodgrass is linked with the "confessional" school of poetry, implying that the poetry is highly personal and autobiographical (352). It is also true that events in the speaker's fictional life parallel actual events in

Snodgrass's life, but as Jerome Mazarro remarks, "there is an even more crucial problem of authenticity than may be suggested by the difficulty of simply writing honestly. The Snodgrass hero working out his problems of being in the fictive world of poems is different from the poet working out problems in the real world" (108). In other words, judging the work on the basis of its relation to the poet's personal life is reductive of the poet's skill, as well as prejudgemental about the work. The poems may contain highly autobiographical material, but as a poet, Snodgrass reshapes these events; refines and structures them--changes some aspects, develops others--until the finished poems are not merely factual records of past experience, but crafted pieces of workmanship in language. Similarly, the speaker is not merely Snodgrass airing his views, but a fully-developed character who more subtly serves the purpose of the poet.

The distinction between Snodgrass and the speaker of these particular poems (who, admittedly, resembles Mr. Snodgrass circumstantially) is supported by the poet's use of other speakers, definitely not Snodgrass, in other poems, obviously not autobiographical. Most notably, Snodgrass writes from the point of view of Adolph Hitler, et al. (The Further Bunker: A Cycle of Poems in Progress), as well as speakers as various as

Orpheus, Spinoza, and a martial arts instructor (Heart's Needle, After Experience). Further obscuring the question of poet vs. persona are Snodgrass's other endeavors, including poetic interpretations of paintings, works of criticism, and translations of poetry (After Experience, In Radical Pursuit, Gallows Songs). Significantly, other of Snodgrass's speakers allude to cycles and damaged families, emphasizing his interest in the subjects as major themes; however, it is the speaker of the following poems--the most natural and eloquent of Snodgrass's voices--that best and most thoroughly examines the cyclical aspect of family dysfunction.

In Remains the speaker connects his own emotional problems (withdrawal from intimacy and avoidance of responsibility) to his emotionally traumatic family background, suggesting that--from the speaker's view--the cycle originated with his parents; however, because he takes no action to change, the speaker's destructive patterns of withdrawal and avoidance perpetuate the cycle within his romantic and marital relationships, as depicted in Heart's Needle and After Experience. Finally, in the Heart's Needle sequence, the speaker tries to break the cycle of dysfunction by acting responsibly as a father, but, by this time, against the almost insurmountable odds of his bitter divorce with the child's mother and his subsequent remarriage. Previous critics, Phillips, Mazzaro, and Heyen, in

particular, insightfully connect the speaker and themes of Heart's Needle to those in Remains and After Experience: The object of this paper is to expand the connection by specifically investigating poems that concern the speaker's intimate relationships with parents, spouses, and child; to suggest the relationship between the speaker's learned emotional behavior as a child and his responses to emotional pressure in his roles as husband and father; and to place the theme of emotional loss in the Heart's Needle sequence into perspective as the inevitable conclusion to the larger cyclical theme of family dysfunction.

Chapter II

The Speaker's Family and Childhood

Family oriented dysfunctions, such as emotional or physical abuse, tend to be perpetuated through families in a cyclic manner because, naturally, people form their ideas of normalcy by observing their early surroundings. The pattern of emotional withdrawal that the speaker establishes in other relationships stems from the earliest example within his family. The speaker reveals significant facts about his own background in his criticisms of the emotional void he perceives in his late sister's life. The speaker makes no direct mention of his parents' effect on his own emotional development, but his bitter criticism of his parents for dysfunctional behavior that he justifies in himself, such as emotional withdrawal and problems of communication, speaks for itself. The speaker's problems of accepting emotional responsibility stem from the influence of his emotionally dysfunctional family, whether or not he chooses to confront it in a constructive manner.

The profound effect of the speaker's background on his lifetime patterns of behavior surfaces in poems written about visits to his parents' home,

leave from the military, a perspective of the speaker's family at the funeral of his sister, and another critical view of his family on the anniversary of his sister's death. One of the earliest examples of the speaker's pattern of emotional withdrawal occurs in "Ten Days Leave" in which the speaker recalls his first visit home after serving in the military. He feels so alien as he "steps down from the dark train blinking" that he "stares" at the trees like "miracles" (1-2). Naturally, the sensation of returning to a familiar place after being gone for long--especially in a war situation--partly accounts for his feeling of strangeness; moreover, particularly in context with other poems, the speaker's emotional removal in the midst of familiar surroundings, such as his old neighborhood and bedroom, indicates the direction of a lifetime pattern.

At first the speaker says that everything "seems just like it seemed" (9), but the perspective of increasing distance with which he describes his family suggests the increasing degree of emotional removal he feels from them. For example, to the speaker his parents' lives appear "like toy trains on a track" (10). The simile implies the distance from which he views his parents' world, and trivializes their pursuits; in addition, as Jerome Mazarro notices, this is only the first of several instances in which

Snodgrass makes use of train track imagery to allude to the speaker's feelings of fatalism, or "determinism," a significant characteristic aspect of the speaker's personality which Snodgrass develops more fully later on (99).

In "Ten Days Leave" the speaker compares his mixed feelings of familiarity and strangeness to a sense of *deja vu*: His father's jokes seem familiar, yet remote, like half remembered "words in some old movie" (12). Similarly, as he wakes the next morning, the speaker's feeling that he "must have dreamed this setting, peopled it," then "wakened out of it" suggests both the intimacy and removal with which he views his old home (19-20). In a curious inversion of imagery, the speaker's perspective of his surroundings diminishes even further when he remarks that although he is now awake, his parents' lives and home are merely part of his dream, kept asleep "like a small homestead / Preserved long past its time in memory" (21-22).

From this distance of dreamlike unreality the speaker feels like "a tourist" in kind of a *Sleeping Beauty* land, who "must not touch things" because instead of waking the family, he might "black them out" (27-29); the speaker's view of himself as outside of the setting, rather than as a part of it, suggests the unease he feels at being in his old environment. Chronologically set before even his first marriage, "Ten Days Leave" is the earliest poem that investigates

the speaker's relationship with his family. Although this particular poem does not explore possible explanations for the speaker's emotional shortcomings, it focuses in on the speaker's characteristic method of distancing himself from emotional stress, anticipating a pattern which will become habitual in the speaker's relationships.

In the previous poem, the speaker feels vaguely distant from his surroundings. He senses that he no longer belongs there, but neither analyzes the reasons, nor discusses his family in concrete detail; however, in the next three poems, the detailed description of his family exudes a degree of hostility and pain that suggests a connection between the speaker's childhood and his adult problems of withdrawal from emotional responsibility. Naturally the possibility exists that the speaker's intense feelings distort his perception of his family members; the vehement description of his mother and father clearly blames them for his sister's--and by inference, his own--emotional problems.

For example, the emotional difficulties the speaker and his sister experience could easily arise from the atmosphere the speaker describes in "The Mother." The imagery and language of the poem reveals that the speaker views his mother as a grasping martyr for the purpose of keeping her family bound to her; her

only power is to feed on them emotionally. In the initial--and gentlest--image of his mother, she is represented by a "star" in the "dead center" (1), surrounded by "her satellites" who draw off "her energies," "heat," and "light" (2-3). She encourages their dependence on her, however, because it bonds her to them emotionally, through her loss and their obligation. The speaker continues to interpret his mother's point of view: She feels her family "drawn" away from her by "dark forces" (5-6); thinking them "out of her reach" however, she is "consoled" by the evilness of "the world," deriving satisfaction (the speaker implies) out of all opportunities to suffer on her family's account, thereby indebting them to her (9).

Though the speaker's tone is critical, the star imagery is not harsh. After this point, however, as if prompted by the subject of her self-inflicted suffering, the speaker adds bitterly, "if evil did not exist, she would create it / To die in righteousness" as a martyr (13-14), content "that she is hated" (16). The speaker suggests that his mother martyrs herself to her family and home, "that sweet dominion they have bolted from" (15), as a way to obsessively bind her family members to her through their guilt. If things "decay, break," or "spoil," she will "gather the debris" to give to her family "with loving tenderness" (17-19); to keep her family emotionally tied to

her, she will "weave a labyrinth of waste," and "wreckage" through which "she and only she can "thread a course" (20, 23). The speaker reports that his mother is so thoroughly ingrained in the pattern of emotional clutching, that she eventually loses her perspective and "all else in her grasp grows clogged" (24). She directs her energy singlemindedly into the emotional blackmail of her family, until "one by one" the other "areas of her brain / Switch off" (25-26), and she clutches her family to her merely from habit and instinct.

The final image of the speaker's mother is an ironically similar--and horrible--inversion of the first image in the poem. In this image, she is again at the center, but this time the center of a web of "the drawn strands of love, spun in her mind" (29), and in the evil, spidery image, "the black shapes of her mates" and "sapless young" radiate around her helplessly, "precariously hung" in the "dark and cluttered" strands (30). Furthermore, in a predatory image, it is no longer the family who takes energy from the mother, but the mother who "moves by habit, hungering and blind" (32), feeding on the emotional destruction that is her only power over them.

Like many women before the 1960's, the speaker's mother has no sphere of influence except in the "sweet dominion" of her own home, and feeling frustrated at

having no real power over the events of her own life, she achieves the only measure of control open to her: The emotional manipulation of her family. The poem indicates that the speaker understands the dynamics of the situation, but not that he forgives his mother and proceeds with his life, which is requisite for his own emotional well-being. Neither does the speaker consider the effect of his mother's emotional manipulation on his own capacity for maintaining relationships. Naturally, with his background, the speaker might well be expected to associate women with guilt, and avoid relationships with women, or if not the relationships themselves, at least the depth of commitment and responsibility that might make him feel vulnerable to more emotional blackmail. Even though the speaker does not discuss a connection, it is logical to conclude that his pattern of problems with marriage and love can be attributed in part to the early effect on him of his mother's dysfunctional behavior.

Similarly, the speaker's description of his father in "Diplomacy: The Father," reveals another likely source of the speaker's relational problems. Written from the second person point of view, the poem addresses the speaker's father directly, discussing what the speaker perceives to be his father's philosophy of life. The title sets the tone for the diplomatic and militaristic language the speaker uses

to present his father's system of beliefs. According to the speaker, the father sees all areas of his life, even--or maybe especially--his personal life, as an immense cold war or power struggle, a "mission" (1), which he must complete by tracking down enemies and defusing them, presumably before the enemies make the first emotional strike.

Within the family structure (the main portion of his father's life which affects the speaker) the strongest of "the contending forces" with which the father grapples is the speaker's manipulative mother (3), an enemy whom the father "cannot choose but love" (9). As the speaker points out, however, to his father "a power so loved could grow oppressive, / could steal your hard-fought freedom to choose / that you won't love." The father responds to emotional pressure from his wife by withdrawal into kind of a passive resistance wherein he notes his enemies' "debts, beliefs," and "weaknesses" (14-15), pretending to feel "affectionate and admiring" until "hate grows real" (18-19). To maintain the balance of power with the enemy, as he views his wife, the father sustains hatred against her by nursing concealed grudges for an "entire ring / of proofs, excuses," and "wrongs" (24). By emotionally withdrawing in this manner, the father shields himself while working on plans to diffuse the enemy, which he perceives not only in his marriage, but

on every level of life.

In fact, according to the speaker, the "fixed aim" of his father is to maintain the balance of power with "the family, the firm," and "this whole world" (44, 46), which he feels he accomplishes by exploiting the weaknesses, and "buy[ing] out" the "strengths" and "hidden talents" of his family, neighbors and associates (43-44), in the speaker's words, creating a "balance of impotence" (48). The father's policy to "exact no faith," "affection" or "loyalty" extends even to the children of the family. Perhaps attempting to find or create weaknesses in his own children, the father encourages them in and reminds them of their dependence on him by never letting them "pay what's due" (61); his money is also an attempt to be "everywhere at once" (64), since he, himself, in emotional "self-defense," is "scarce" (65-66), isolating himself physically and emotionally from people to help protect the "balance / of power" (45-46).

Ultimately, the language suggests that for achieving that constant "balance of power," the father pays the price in the loss of both personal identity and intimate emotional ties: The word choice in the idea that the father's "best disguise" is to "turn grey" and spread himself thin enough to be "part of all unknowns" suggests a fading sense of identity (66-68); the speaker's detachment in

contemplating his father's death, saying he will "vaporize / into the fog" and appear "unworldly" to the "alien earth" (68-69, 71, 72), indicates the degree to which the father alienates family members, while the choice of words, again, suggests fading identity and estrangement.

Furthermore, Snodgrass's technique reinforces even more subtle impressions: For example, the pattern imposed by both the rhyme scheme and the forced sentence structure supports the rigidity of the military metaphor; likewise, the most significant use of technique is the refrain-like repetition of the words "as in yourself." The repetition of the phrase, which changes its meaning in each stanza and in the final line of the poem, clearly indicates that on some level the speaker recognizes his own tendencies to withdraw, and of the similarity between his own action and that for which he criticizes his father.

Unfortunately, recognition of a behavioral pattern is not necessarily followed by action to change. The speaker's criticism of his parents' effect on his sister implies that he holds them in some measure responsible for the outcome of his sister's life; he feels that he would do things differently. Either the speaker does not fully recognize his similarity to his father as the poem implies, or he recognizes it but

denies its significance. A third possibility is that he recognizes the pattern, but simply cannot break the cycle. Whether or not the speaker recognizes the cycle in his own life, he certainly identifies behavioral patterns in his parents lives, such as emotional manipulation and withdrawal, which could potentially contribute to relational difficulties in his and his sister's lives.

Considering the mother's compulsive grasping for emotional control, and the father's abdication of emotional responsibility, the children's childhood environment could hardly be considered emotionally stable. In the poem "The Mouse" the speaker recalls a detail of their shared past, which he compares to a sinister game of cat-and-mouse. The poem begins with a comical image, the speaker's recollection of an evening when he and his sister conducted the funeral of a mouse, carrying it "all around the house / On a piece of tinfoil, crying" (4-6). He quickly adds that they were "ridiculous children" bawling "about nothing" (7-8), in a voice that echoes with parental admonition. He goes on, at first recalling some of the other warnings and rebukes that children typically receive: "Be well-bred"; "we can't all win"; "don't whine" (10-12). The meaning the speaker attaches to the admonishments, however, is not typical. Most people learn to "live with some things" gracefully, but the speaker recalls the continual stress of learning to

live with things "bitterer than dying" or "cold as hate" (13-14). The poem suggests that the bitterness they live with is enmeshed in the ambiguous "old insatiable loves" (15).

For the speaker, the "loves" could refer to the insecurity of a child who constantly tries (but is never able) to earn the love of his parents by pleasing them. In the case of the parents, the reference to "insatiable loves" could refer to the father's love of keeping the balance of power and the mother's love of emotional control over the family, both really loves of power and the cause of continual emotional warfare between the parents, which often extends to the children as well.

The mouse imagery evolves further as the speaker compares his sister's growing stress living as a pawn under the parents' respective "loves" to the feelings of a mouse under the paw of a "polite, wakeful" cat (17). The imagery of the cat that "pats at you," "wants to see you crawl," and "picks you back alive" (19-21) especially evokes the manipulative tactics of the mother that go on until, "weak with dread," "the little animal / Plays out" (22, 25-26). The speaker reinforces the comparison of his sister and the mouse in the final two stanzas by equating the blank mind and eyes of the shocked mouse to the "dulled heart" of his sister, who dies "asthmatic,

timid, twenty-five," and "unwed" (28), a result, the speaker suggests, of a lifetime of emotional battering.

Furthermore, as a parallel to the funeral of the mouse, the speaker closes the poem by recalling the funeral of his sister, where he "wouldn't spare one tear," for his childhood companion (30). The choice of the word "wouldn't" is significant, because unlike the words "didn't" or "couldn't," it implies the involvement of the speaker's free will in a voluntary emotional withdrawal, which he suggests is the result of the same treatment which strangled his sister's emotional growth.

Another word choice worth noting is the use of the word "asthmatic" in line twenty-eight. Although of slight importance on its own in this particular poem, it is the first of many references to suffocation, which becomes a significant theme in relation to the speaker's parents. The poems "The Mother" and "Dipolomacy: The Father," show the relational nature of the problems the speaker finds in lives of his parents. The poem "The Mouse" represents the speaker's opinion of the effect of those problems on his sister, implying that he blames his parents for her short and joyless life; by inference, if he blames his parents for his sister's emotional frailty, then he blames them for his own emotional shortcomings, as well. The speaker brings himself much grief by imitating the very

behavior for which he criticizes his father, but because he views his motives for withdrawing as necessary for self-protection, it is possible that the speaker truly does not recognize the pattern he perpetuates. In any case, the speaker can only break the cycle by changing his habit of passive behavior, and taking responsibility for his own actions and life, instead of withdrawing and placing blame elsewhere.

By distancing himself, the speaker is able to avoid the pain of confronting his emotional difficulties. Not surprisingly, the body of Snodgrass's poems suggest that the speaker's response to his traumatic childhood is to withdraw from his family. At least, the poems record no significant contact between the speaker and his parents until after the death of his sister, when he visits for the funeral. The sad and angry poems about the trappings of his sister's funeral and the manner of disposal of her possessions suggest that the speaker disapproves of their parents' treatment of her in death as much as he disapproved of their treatment of her in life. For example, in "Viewing The Body" the speaker criticizes the gaudiness of the funeral as unsuitable for the quiet life of the person who was his sister. To him the funeral flowers are not comforting reminders of the thoughts of friends and neighbors, but showy "like a

ganster's funeral" (1). He is offended by the amount of makeup the mortuary puts on his sister, "she, who never wore / lipstick" (4-5), saying harshly that the eyeshadow makes her look "like a whore" (2).

Criticizing details of the funeral, however, is as close as the speaker is able to come to approaching the subject that really bothers him.

The speaker actually mourns less for his sister's death than for the emotional void which he perceives was her life, and for which he still holds their parents responsible. The speaker points out that his sister, while alive, would never have had the opportunity to wear the fancy dress she wears in her casket because she "never got taken out" (6), was "scarcely looked at, much less / Wanted or talked about" (7-8). The placement of the words "much less" in the position of power at the end of the line emphasizes their literal meaning; the speaker feels his sister's life was "much less" than it should have been in every respect. The blunt words about his sister's undesirability sound cruel coming from a newly bereaved brother; the bluntness demonstrates the degree to which the speaker has purposely detached himself from the situation, but the words are not uttered entirely without pity. In the third stanza the speaker alludes to the source of his sister's emotional deficiencies by mentioning that "gray as a mouse" she crept the "dark halls" at "her mother's" (9-10). The lines

allude to his previous identification of her with a mouse, a portrayal of her as a victim of their mother's emotional traps, reinforcing the idea that the speaker blames his parents for his sister's loneliness.

Interestingly enough, although the speaker comments insightfully about his sister's emotional shortcomings, he still hesitates to face his own. For example, he bases his assumption that his sister's life was emotionally empty on the fact that she never married or even had relationships, but "slept alone" under "dim bedcovers" (11-12). Of course, following this line of thought the speaker needs only to point to his many relationships to prove his own normalcy; however, he first needs to overlook the fact that the emotional withdrawal which causes the failure of those relationships, is part of a larger pattern of dysfunction; instead he prefers to view it as his form of self-imposed protection.

Self-deception precludes much honest introspection, and someone as consistently emotionally withdrawn as the speaker--who in "The Mouse" admits that he would not even cry at his sister's funeral--eventually loses touch with his real feelings and motives. One of the strongest emotional bonds is that formed between siblings as allies in a hostile family environment; no matter how thoroughly the speaker

insulates himself, it is impossible to believe that his impassiveness at the funeral accurately reflects his feelings.

Yet the speaker withdraws from the painful feelings, instead concentrating bitterly on the flaws of the funeral and on the irony that her funeral is the only "place of honor" ever held by his mouse-like sister. In spite of the speaker's stoicism, the final image of the coffin lid with its "obscene red folds / Of satin" closing down on his sister betrays his inner feelings of helplessness and horror. On the superficial level, the speaker finds the red satin of the casket "obscene" merely because of its inappropriate garishness; however, on another level, the imagery of the jawlike closing of the coffin lid signifies death itself, which in the case of the young woman who has never experienced life, is the real obscenity. The speaker disapproves of the funeral arrangements just as he disapproved of the emotional arrangements in his sister's life, but there is no evidence that the speaker took action to influence either the funeral arrangements or the quality of his sister's life while she lived. Conceivably, the speaker might feel guilty about his own passivity toward his sister, but instead he distances himself from his emotions, in this case by concentrating on finding fault.

The speaker's harsh criticism of the funeral conceals emotional pain from which the speaker instinctively withdraws. In the poem "Disposal" the speaker more thoroughly examines the subject of his sister's life as the family decides what to do with her few possessions. The double connotation of the title "Disposal" succinctly suggests the bleakness of his sister's life. On the one hand, the word "disposal" connotes the systematic destruction of garbage, a meaning which describes the speaker's saddened perception of the disbursement of the small accumulation of his sister's life; on the other hand, in legal terminology, the word "disposal" refers to the administration of final matters, a sense which also practically applies to the action of the poem. Even as the family disposes--in the legal sense--of the possessions of the speaker's sister, the connotation of the other sense of the word is present, and in either case, the speaker cannot help but sadly remember the loneliness of his sister's life for which he still blames his parents.

The use of language allows both senses of the word "disposal" to apply. As the speaker's family literally settles the final matter of the sister's possessions, particular word choices suggest the idea of getting rid of refuse; for example, in the first stanza the speaker remarks that his sister's gown is "fobbed off" on a

friend who wonders if it is "spoiled" (3-4). The speaker, however, knows the gown was not a cast-off, but "unworn," "meant for dances" his sister would have "scarcely dared attend" (1-2). To the speaker, the unworn gown, with its implications of fun and dates that were never known, embodies the pathos of his sister's life. Similarly, to the speaker, the unused objects from his sister's hope chest symbolize her unfulfilled emotional life, with the particular wording suggesting the area of intimacy: A single lace nightgown, "unsoiled / By wear" (9-10), suggests to the speaker the lack in his sister's life of emotional or sexual involvement; like the unused "nightthing" she was "untouched by human hands" (9-10). Like in "Viewing the Body," the speaker assumes his sister was unhappy because she never married or even dated, and presumably he still blames their parents for the emotional unfulfillment which, for him, the articles in the hope chest represent.

In addition, connotations of both senses of the word "disposal" continue. The family is at a loss at how to dispose of some of the possessions. They examine then reseal her unused silver in its case like "old plans or "failed securities" (6-7). The imagery of valueless documents reinforces the connotation of garbage disposal, as does the description of the unfashionable "cancelled patterns" and "markdowns" his

sister "actually wore" (11-12); the speaker reports that the family knows no one "so poor / They'd take" his sister's old clothes, yet they "don't dare burn" them or otherwise dispose of her personal items as if they were garbage, now that she is "spared all need" of them (11, 13-14). In both senses of the word, the "disposal" of his sister's few possessions reminds the speaker of the emotional poverty of his sister's life.

The speaker implies the depths of loneliness in which he believes his sister existed when he suggests that she is now out of her misery. After all, now she is not only "spared all need" and "all passion," but she is "saved from loss" that the speaker views as inevitable in life (14-15). Single women in the 1960's were objects of pity, and the speaker continues to cite the absence of relationships in his sister's life as primary evidence of her desolation: Earlier he compares the unworn gown and negligee to his sister's nonexistent social and romantic life, and now he reworks the metaphor to compare his sister, as she "lies boxed in satins," to an unused "pair of party shoes" that never found "a taker" (15-17). Of course, the attitude was typical of the times, but the speaker withdraws behind the attitude and ignores his own unmet emotional obligations to his sister; he thoroughly dissects her timidity and undesirability, but never asks himself where he was while his sister was dying of

loneliness.

In fact, self-reproach, a feeling that often accompanies mourning, is conspicuously absent in the speaker's impressions of his sister's funeral; instead, he blames others for his sister's solitary life: In "Disposal" he ambiguously blames the "maker" of a "life somehow gone out of fashion" (18-19), while in "The Mouse" and "Viewing the Body" the speaker holds his parents responsible for his sister's social awkwardness. By blaming a mysterious "maker," the speaker withdraws from responsibility by implying the control of an ambiguous greater power, an attitude of fatalism which relieves the speaker of direct accountability. By blaming his parents, he avoids emotional responsibility both generally and specifically: Generally, criticizing his parents for his sister's unhappiness suggests that the speaker holds them responsible for his own emotional difficulties as well; specifically, blaming his parents for his sister's loneliness lets him avoid guilt for his emotional withdrawal from her. Of course had the speaker's sister lived the responsibility for taking action to change would have been hers, ultimately. Similarly, and significantly, the final responsibility to end the cycle of dysfunction in the speaker's own life--by breaking the pattern of habitual withdrawal--lies with the speaker.

Unfortunately, the process of changing life-long

patterns, even--maybe especially--self-destructive ones, is seldom clear-cut or simple, as disparities between the speaker's intentions and actions illustrate: For example, in "Diplomacy: The Father" the degree of self-recognition in the speaker's criticism of his father indicates an intention to break the cycle of emotional withdrawal in his own life; however, in "The Mouse," "Viewing the Body" and "Disposal" the speaker clearly continues to emotionally distance himself from his family, and passively avoids taking emotional responsibility. Ironically, while the speaker holds his parents responsible, because of their behavior, for his sister's emotional shortcomings, he ignores his own emotional responsibilities, justifying his behavior of emotional withdrawal as a cure for (rather than a symptom of) dysfunction. Though poems like "The Mother," "Diplomacy: The Father," and "The Mouse" clearly demonstrate that he associates his and his sister's relational problems with their childhood, the speaker still avoids taking the connection to its logical conclusion, which would force him to consider the effect of his behavior on his own children. Instead of admitting that his behavior perpetuates a larger pattern of detrimental behavior, and taking action to change his behavior, the speaker rationalizes instances of emotional withdrawal as individual protective measures, taken to meet separate emotional crises as

they arise.

Granted, it is possible that the speaker is not conscious of disparities between his intentions and actions, that he recognizes his father's pattern of withdrawal in himself, but genuinely does not perceive his own emotional withdrawal as a dysfunction; that he does not understand the larger implications of his own potential role as a parent in the cycle of dysfunction. Although it is even more likely that on some level the speaker recognizes his behavior as destructive, he withdraws from the conscious knowledge in order to avoid the conflict that change would entail. In that light the speaker's emotional blind spot is not difficult to interpret: Should the speaker consciously acknowledge that his habit of emotional withdrawal perpetuates a continuing cycle of dysfunction, then, in the interests of the emotional well being of the next generation, he would have to take action to change; however, as Jerome Mazzarro notes, "one of the problems of accepting responsibility has ever been the disappointment people feel when realizing how rudimentary the changes are that have to be made (111). For the speaker, basic behavioral change not only would be fraught with the emotional conflict the speaker dreads, but also would open up the possibility of failure. Instead, it is much easier for the speaker to turn a blind eye to the larger implications and continue in his present comfortable habit of keeping all possible sources of

conflict at emotional arms' length, including his parents.

Realistically, the speaker may never achieve an ideal relationship with his parents, but to come to some terms of acceptance of them is the first necessary step toward changing his pattern of emotional withdrawal. Unfortunately, a visit to his parents' home a year later, as reported in "The Survivors," reveals through imagery further depths of withdrawal and revulsion. From the first stanza, it becomes immediately obvious that the speaker, rather than coming to terms with his parents, emotionally distances himself from them more firmly than ever. In the first place, the speaker directs the poem to his dead sister, withdrawing from even the outward appearance of communication with his parents. Next, instead of sympathetically wondering how his parents manage with the internal pain of his sister's death, the speaker concentrates coldly on externals, trying to guess how his parents will "rearrange / Their life, now you were dead" (3-4). Finally, in response to his own query about "what might change" (1), the speaker lists a catalogue of external details in his parents' lives which by inference actually expresses his repressed feelings toward his parents themselves: Descriptions of various items in imagery of suffocation, decay, and blindness, clearly indicate the speaker's bitterness

against his parents which, in his view, justifies his emotional withdrawal from them.

For example, the speaker uses language evocative of suffocation, decay, and blindness in a detailed description of his parents' home, both outside and inside. In stanzas two through five, as the speaker enters the yard, the choking imagery of the overgrown yard, including the "unkept" lawn (6), the rock gardens "dense" with "bindweed" (7-8), and "tangling" rosebushes "squandered over everything" (8-9), suggests the immediate feelings of suffocation with which the speaker identifies his parents. In addition, the speaker notes that everything is either overgrown or "down in disrepair" (15), suggesting his view of his parents' corruption through description of the physical corruption surrounding them. For example, the parents' yard deteriorates with disuse: The rose trellises "blown down" are "still sprawled there" (11-12), and "broken odd ends" of furniture litter the yard (13). The speaker suggests the idea of decay even more explicitly in the description of the "uncared-for" tree, "eaten with worms" (18-19): The "bitter cherries" rot and drop "brown and soft and botched" until the "ground is thick with flies" (20-23). As the speaker approaches the front door, he shifts focus on the external level from the decomposing yard to the stone lions that flank the front steps; he also shifts focus from the imagery of decay to the imagery of

blindness. Blinded by cement that "someone" has patched "across their eyes" (24-24), the lions suggest the blindness for which the speaker--somewhat unfairly, considering his own penchant for self-deception--criticizes his parents.

In the second half of the poem, the speaker continues to describe entering his parents' home in language that implies their blindness. As he enters the house, he notices that their "blinds" are "drawn" (26), and inside the house is "dark" and "still" (27). The speaker continues the imagery of blindness as he describes how his parents withdraw from emotional communication by avoiding each other. They take turns inventing vague errands that take them "from room to room" in the "wan / half-light" (29-30), and "drop their eyes" when their paths happen to cross. Later they continue to avoid meaningful communication--and eye contact--by keeping themselves glued to the "unnatural, cold light" of the television until the screen "goes dim" and "the image dies" (43-45).

If the imagery of blindness suggests the speaker's criticism of his parents for what he considers their blindness, then his return to the imagery of decay, this time hidden decay, indicates his feelings of revulsion toward what he regards as their underlying corruption: The street lights come on, children go in for the night, and his parents watch television in

silence; meanwhile, the speaker points out, underneath it all, "in the cellar" the putrid "sewers / Rise, unseen" (46-47), and horrible "pale white / ants" grow in "decaying stacks of old newspapers" (47-48). The catalogue of details suggesting the speaker's condemnation of his parents' blindness and corruption originates to answer his question about "what might change" since his sister's death. The emphasis of the final couplet, especially following the consistently five-line stanzas, reinforces the shock value of the news the speaker delivers with the timing of a punchline: There is no change; "nothing is different here" (52). The line reinforces the idea that the speaker still blames his parents for his sister's sad circumstances, and encapsulates his criticisms of his parents' emotional shortcomings, offenses which, in his view, sufficiently justify his withdrawal from them.

Although in "The Survivors" the speaker criticizes his parents' withdrawal from communication, in "Fourth Of July" --which depicts the same visit home--the speaker does not transcend his own bitterness enough to communicate with his parents sympathetically about his sister's death; instead, relentlessly using imagery of suffocation, the speaker places his withdrawal on the level of involuntary emotional necessity, going as far as to suggest that dying was his sister's ultimate escape from the parents' stifling grasping for emotional control. Although the speaker never directly

states that his sister took her own life, in the first stanza he implies that his sister's death was an act of resistance by comparing her death to the strike of laborers who "celebrate / Their Independence her own way" (3-4); like the laborers, the speaker's sister simply "stopped" (5). In addition, the extra emphasis provided by the capitalization of the word "Independence" reinforces the concrete idea that the poem takes place on Independence Day, and more firmly connects the sister's death to a celebration of independence as well.

Furthermore, considering the action of the poem takes place on the anniversary of the sister's death, the family's marked silence on the subject reveals the poor state of communication between family members; as the speaker asks, "What can anybody say?" (8). To make an awkward situation even worse, the speaker sees the "hideous mistake" of bringing his new "young wife" whose twenty-fifth birthday coincides with the anniversary of her late sister-in-law's death (17,18). The "deep breath" she takes to blow out the birthday candles only reminds everyone that she is "unforgivably alive" (18, 19). (In context with the other poems it is not surprising that the martyr-like mother would provide a birthday cake for her new daughter-in-law on the first anniversary of her own daughter's death.) The aversion to communication that is evident in

"Fourth of July" indicates the level of emotional withdrawal that infects the speaker and his family, extending even to his wife, who takes her cue from the rest of the family by keeping her comments to herself and putting the best "face on things" she can (15). The speaker never tries to bridge the communication gap with his parents. Although critical of their lack of communication with each other in "The Survivors," he justifies his own withdrawal from communication by presupposing its futility, declaring--with all the emphasis accorded the final line--"No one would hear me, even if I spoke" (52).

In addition, references to difficulty in breathing reinforce the idea that from the speaker's point of view, at least, his withdrawal from his parents occurs on the level of involuntary physical necessity: The speaker and his new wife lie sleepless in his sister's old room (one wonders why they do not sleep in his old room, instead), depressed by the sight of her possessions, among them the "bedside asthma pipe" (11); the the smoke from the birthday candles "settles through the room" heavily like a "cheap stage set for Juliet's tomb" (22-23). Thoughts of the sister's death hang over the room as thickly as the smoke, and the attempt to celebrate the wife's birthday seem forced; the speaker leaves his meal "cold on the dish" (24).

To escape the oppressive atmosphere of the house, the speaker and his wife attend an old-fashioned Fourth

of July celebration at the park; however, the repetition of the initial phrase "for hours" conveys the impression that the speaker finds the "fireworks," "marching band" and "drill team" tedious rather than enjoyable (26, 27, 28). During the speeches and the crowning of the queen the speaker is still weighed-down with thoughts of his sister's death, imagining, somewhat morbidly, that she now exists in an "ingrown nation" among "a people silent and withdrawn" (34-35). He expands the imagery of suffocation as he describes death as a "deprived" and "smoke-filled" town every bit as "stifling" as the concrete "war-contract factory town" from which his sister withdrew a year ago (31, 36, 37). Furthermore, the ambiguous image of the speaker's sister and "the dead" in "shared disgrace," keeping the anniversary of her death as "an old holiday of blame," reinforces the earlier suggestion that death was his sister's form of conscious and permanent emotional withdrawal from life (41, 42, 43).

The speaker himself keeps July Fourth as a holiday of blame. In the second-to-last stanza the speaker uses the imagery of suffocation to focus blame on his parents; the association of his parents with imagery of suffocation implies their role of responsibility in the death of his sister, further reinforcing the speaker's own justifications for withdrawal from them: Outside, the oppression of the "sulfurous smoke" of the factory

town is his "father's world"; inside his "mother's house" the "lint and dust" make the speaker "wheeze and choke" (47-48); the speaker's sister simply "could not breathe" (43). By holding his parents vaguely responsible for his sister's death, the speaker justifies his own emotional withdrawal from them by suggesting that the choice is not one of just personal preference, but one of self-preservation. The speaker's rationalizations for avoiding emotional responsibility are not always consistent, but they do have a common denominator in the idea that his emotional life is beyond his own control: In the final stanza--anticipating fatalistic attitudes toward other relationships, as well--the speaker shifts the blame to an ambiguous power, declaring the ironic contrast between his wife ("pregnant") and his sister ("in her grave") is the result of "an evil, stupid joke" (49). Interestingly enough, the speaker never blames his sister for not taking the responsibility of making her own life bearable. The speaker identifies more sympathetically with his sister than with any one else in his family; one suspects that his steadfast depiction of her as a victim reflects his view of himself as a victim, both of their parents and of fate.

The speaker's view of self-as-victim allows him to rationalize his emotional withdrawal from his parents because he blames them for their lack of emotional responsibility to himself and his sister as children,

going as far as to connect them with the death of his sister; the speaker, except for the suggestion in "Diplomacy: The Father," does not discuss similarities between his own emotional withdrawal and the behavior for which he cannot forgive his parents. In the previous group of poems the speaker reveals the source of his self-defeating behavior as his parents, but shows no signs of taking the necessary action to break the pattern and change that behavior, at least toward his parents. Unfortunately, even if the speaker is satisfied to solve his emotional difficulties with his parents by simply removing himself from their sphere of influence (except for special occasions), he still needs to come to terms with emotional responsibility and communication as the necessary risk and reward in his roles as husband and father. Whether the speaker purposely ignores the responsibility of acknowledging the larger implications of cyclic dysfunction, or, honestly--if somewhat selfishly--lets personal motives and immediate needs obscure the larger vision, the result will be the same: The speaker will perpetuate in his own relationships the dysfunctional behavior for which he criticizes his parents.

Chapter III

The Cycle of Dysfunction Continues

In Remains Snodgrass depicts a speaker who is the product of an emotionally dysfunctional family. In most cases, the dysfunction continues in the lives of the victims with their spouses and children, unless they themselves can break the cycle. In Heart's Needle and After Experience Snodgrass allows his speaker the awareness of his emotional shortcomings, the sensitivity to feel guilt about them, but not the strength to take action to change. The same emotional uninvolvedness which characterizes the speaker's relationship with his parents also inhibits his attempts at a successful marriage. The speaker's repetition of the pattern of emotional withdrawal threatens the stability of his marriage with his current spouse. On the one hand, the speaker is capable of great tenderness, and desires to live in a permanent relationship; on the other hand, because of his fears of intimacy and his habit of emotionally distancing himself, he often chooses instead to emotionally withdraw from responsibilities such as mutual support and trust that are necessary to sustain a healthy marriage: Naturally, the speaker's emotional defection brings down on him the very emotional

upheaval he fears. This duality of emotional conflict creates an unhappy tension which forces the speaker to examine his attitudes toward love and marriage, and fidelity; however, the speaker finally takes no action to claim responsibility necessary in a sound relationship.

Snodgrass shows the conflict in his speaker's attitude about marriage through the range of feelings expressed in the poems that deal with love relationships and marriage. At his most optimistic, the speaker's tone is confident and celebratory, and at the lowest, savage. For example, in "Regraduating The Lute" from After Experience the tone of the speaker is both passionate and hopeful. Snodgrass's imagery suggests that the regraduating of the lute represents the fine tuning which the speaker's love relationship must undergo to achieve a fine balance, "not so much as might lose / endurance to sustain a music" (9-10), but just enough so that the lute responds to "the least touch / Trembles to the lightest song" (14-15). In the delicate process the speaker must pare "all excess from behind the tempered face / The way a long grief hollows the cheeks away" (7-8) and indeed, he is prepared for, even enjoys, the pains he takes to care for the lute, and metaphorically, the relationship.

Snodgrass's use of words such as "power," "resonance" (1), "living grain" (3), "light," and

"shine" (13), suggests the optimism of the speaker; his use of iambic pentameter in line sixteen evokes the rhythmic caress of the speaker as he rubs the "brilliant varnish to a soft/Old silver glow" (17-18); after the speaker declares the voice of the lute to be "equal to any in the world" (19), he takes it home, keeping it, significantly, on the bed. In addition, Snodgrass's use of technique such as end rhyme, the ambiguity of the word "face," and the full pause of the caesura before the words "To Stay"--all in the final tercet--all emphasize the strength of the speaker's hope for a permanent relationship, and the potential he has for loyalty. Snodgrass's combination of technique and content in "Regruading the Lute" reinforce his depiction of a speaker that longs to reach out for intimate contact.

In "Song" (out of two poems in Heart's Needle entitled "Song" this is the one that begins "Sweet Beast"), Snodgrass shows the side of the speaker that is confident and celebratory about love, but he also allows insight into the speaker's feelings of past alienation, that might later hurt his chances at a relationship. Snodgrass's use of animal imagery creates an underlying sensuality as it reinforces the poem's theme of isolation. The speaker describes himself as a loner, a "stray from my own type" (17), "a proud rejected man / who lived on the edges" (1-3), using imagery of a nocturnal feline that "curled and

slept all day," nursing "bloodless wounds" (9-10). In this "singular and violent" love poem (13), the speaker is attracted to someone because he perceives her to be as emotionally isolated, as "conspicuously alone," as himself (8); someone to whom he intensely relates because she has "crept and flinched away" from society as he always has done (5).

In "Song" the speaker rejoices that although his "love was near to spoiled / and curdled," and he inhabits a world where he can "find no kin, no child" he has the luck to discover someone he can call "Sweet beast, cat of my own stripe" (19-23). In his alley-cat-like ardor and the idealistic fervor of infatuation, the speaker overlooks the draw-backs and possible consequences of basing a permanent relationship on mutual emotional shortcomings, but they are easy to imagine. Again, we see the duality of Snodgrass's speaker and the world he inhabits. He has the capacity to experience love in spite of his emotionally deficient background, but he is unconsciously influenced to continue the cyclic behavior of dysfunction by falling in love with someone almost certain to be an inappropriate partner. In addition, Snodgrass shows that having the capacity to love does not automatically mean that the capacity will be used thoughtfully.

Snodgrass suggests the speaker's inner discord

about the subject of love by the changes in mood between poems about love. The speaker's tones of affirmation in the previous two poems contrast sharply with the three following poems, in which Snodgrass reveals varying degrees of emotional withdrawal in the speaker, including uncertainty, fearfulness, and cynicism about love. For example, in the poem "What We Said" the speaker describes himself being "stunned in that first estrangement" from his wife (1). The bitterness and intensity of the moment, described graphically in imagery of illness and decay, causes the speaker to doubt his odds of success in future love relationships--in fact, he probably has the success of a certain impending relationship in mind. Instead of the fall colors, the speaker sees "inflamed" leaves "sick as words" (3). In a garbage dump, the "soiled, gray innards" of a "lost couch" (7-8), and the fluttering refuse in bare trees remind the speaker not only of the past inhabitants, but in an ominous military metaphor, of the "new orders moving in" (20).

Significantly, the use of war imagery expands the idea of humanity's refuse and decay that the vivid description of the garbage mounds first suggests. The speaker compares the destruction of the "last war," when "whole continents went into wreckage" to the wreckage of his marriage, asking, "What fools could do that again?" (21-24); in spite of uncertainty and "ruin on every side," the speaker remembers his determination

to "set our loves in order" (25-26). He suggests wishing he had heeded his earlier uncertainty when he says emphatically in the last two lines of the poem, "Surely, we told each other. / Surely. That's what we said" (27-28). The sense of uncertainty in these final two lines expands with the repetition of--and the appeal for reassurance in--the word "surely." Snodgrass's placement of caesuras further emphasize the repeated word "surely," reinforcing the irony in the speaker's words of self-reassurance, and suggesting his surfacing doubts about his ability to succeed in a permanent relationship.

In "The Lovers Go Fly a Kite" from After Experience, Snodgrass explores another facet of the speaker's complex and often contrary emotions concerning love and marriage. Here the speaker goes a step further, expressing the opinion that love is not only uncertain, but perhaps a waste of effort as well. His skepticism is encapsulized in the first line: "What's up, today with our lovers?" In this poem Snodgrass uses the image of "bright tatters--a kite / That plunges and bobs" as a metaphor for unpredictable love, which he admits, is capable of "no improbable height" (2-4). Unfortunately--in love as with a kite--such intoxicating heights are seldom achieved and never sustained indefinitely; from the speaker's point of view, which is not entirely unsympathetic, the young

lovers spend most of their effort trying to salvage the "wobbling, frail" affair (11), which shudders "like a hooked fish" (5). They "reel in string / And sprint" (6-7), and "tear up their shirts for a tail / In hopes that might steady" the unstable kite (9-11); however, the speaker can view only as pathetic their "poor moth of twigs and tissue / That would spill if one chill wind coughed" (14-15). Even though the speaker warily refers to love as "some exquisite sting ray" from a "poisonous deep (18-19), he still acknowledges its validity for the young couple who "say it's their weather ear / Keeping the heart's patrol" (21-22). He grudgingly admires their strength in taking in stride the "treacherous, washed-out year" and continuing to search for "one sprig of olive" (23-24). Although the speaker views the idea of a love relationship for himself with suspicion and pessimism, and even ridicules the couple's persistent efforts at keeping the kite aloft, he admits that people find happiness in the endeavor of partnership. Why else would they do it?

In the "What We Said" and "The Lovers Go Fly A Kite," Snodgrass gives evidence that one side of his speaker's complex emotional make-up includes the tendency to emotionally withdraw himself because of his uncertainty and skepticism on the subject of a permanent romantic partner. No doubt the speaker's marital problems reinforce his fear of intimacy, but

the foundation of emotional removal had been in place long before his marriage. The speaker's inner thoughts and impressions "At the Park Dance," reveal an important source of the emotional dilemma which intimacy creates for him.

On the initial examination, "At the Park Dance" is one of the least structured of the poems in Heart's Needle, with no immediately obvious rhyme scheme or meter. This movement away from structure reinforces a loose, stream-of-consciousness portrayal of the speaker's thoughts. Closer inspection reveals that each word at the end of a first and fourth line rhymes with the first word of the next line, and that the poem follows a syllabic pattern instead of metrical, alternating five, six and seven syllables per line; however, the structure does not contradict, but enhances the impression of free thought by suggesting some of the quirky, circuituous processes of logic that take place in seemingly unstructured thought. In addition, the apparant dichotomy of the seemingly unstructured--but in reality structured--poem supports the idea of the conflict that exists within the speaker's personality: He is a person capable of emotional fulfillment, but one who instead inevitably distances himself. Problems of the psyche and the heart are too complicated to have a single answer, but Snodgrass's choice of language in "At the Park Dance"

explains, in part at least, the speaker's fear of emotional commitment. From the speaker's point of view, the "loving strangers" in the park appear to be "fading out together" until they "merge" with the landscape (3, 6-7). The choice of words, which describes the couple walking away in the twilight in terms of blending into the background and each other, emphasizes the speaker's fear of losing his own identity in emotional involvement. The image continues and intensifies as the speaker watches the couple continue to fade together until in line eleven they achieve "love's vanishing point" where "all perspectives mingle,"

where even the most
close things are indistinct
or lost, where bright worlds shrink,
they will grope to find
blind eyes make all one world;
their unseen arms, horizons.

In addition, the speaker's fear of loss of identity in "At the Park Dance" is reminiscent of the faded identity of the father in "Diplomacy: The Father," linking his emotional avoidance to his childhood and dysfunctional family background; however, even without the complete perspective that the other poems provide, the idea of childhood clearly insinuates itself. The girls dancing in the pavilion look like milkweed bobbing from childish fingers" (23-24), and as Richard Howard succinctly puts it, "the stars glinting like jacks" in the final stanza, is a "reduction of the

cosmos to a child's game" (474).

Naturally, most people form an idea of marriage by observing their parents during childhood, so the glimpse into the speaker's fears of loss of identity as being grounded in childhood explains the reluctance he feels on one hand, and the attraction on the other, to emotional commitment. In the previous poems various uses of technique reinforce the emotional tensions of the poems, which are examples of the speaker's confusion about emotional partnership. Contradictions that exist in the speaker's attitudes are logical in the context of his past, and part of what make him genuine. Snodgrass does not always explain the speaker's motives, but rather, presents a complex character whose feelings and opinions are believable, even when inconsistent, and leaves him for the readers to analyze.

The speaker's inconsistent attitude toward marriage in general carries over to issues within the marriage, specifically the subject of marital infidelity. The speaker does not indicate that he believes marital infidelity to be a question of sin; he uses logic and emotion to guide decisions about his behavior, but his ever-present conflict of emotion sometimes skews the logic of the matter. On one hand, he suffers guilt for his infidelity, but on the other, one senses that he would suffer just as much in relinquishing the behavior, so eventually he

pragmatically decides he might as well have the affairs. In addition, the speaker's simultaneous involvement in a marriage and another serious relationship is a way of emotionally distancing himself from both his wife and his lover.

As in the poems about marriage, Snodgrass depicts the speaker in a variety of different poses and situations relating to the subject of marital infidelity, ranging from humorous, self-examining, guilty and angry. For example, in "April Inventory," a poem about self-honesty, the speaker first approaches the subject of his weakness in a disarming manner, by poking fun at himself, commenting that the girls he customarily ogles at the school where he teaches "have grown so young by now / I have to nudge myself to stare" (13-14). Yet, at the same time, he implies that the "child" he teaches "how to love" is one of the young students at his school, certainly a questionable situation (35-36).

The speaker gets a bit enmeshed in his own logic as he rationalizes: First he says, "I have not learned there is a lie" (43); he elaborates on the lie, adding, "Love shall be blonder, slimmer, younger" (44). The statement contradicts itself. The speaker names specific characteristics of a "lie" (love shall be young and blond), yet claims not to know that lie. In practical terms, if he has "not learned" the lie he can

still justify each new affair as a genuine search for love; whereas, if he has learned the lie--if he is honest with himself--he must admit to choosing a lie, if that is the case. Self-deception exists in this poem along with self-examination, as the speaker glibly justifies his insensitivity to anything other than his own motives and needs. As usual, though, just one facet of the emotional conflict shows through in this encounter with the speaker, and of course, it is nothing like any of the others.

Taking a more serious tone in "Seeing You Have..." the speaker again examines his motives for infidelity, but this time reaches no satisfying conclusion when he asks himself "Why are you envious of boys / Who prowl the street all night in packs" (5-6). The speaker's tone is of painful awareness of the potential damage that his inconsistency could cause in his relationship with "a woman / Whose loves grow thick as the weeds" (1-2). Her quiet simplicity and strength, "like the tall grass, common, / That sends roots, where it needs, Six feet into the prairies" only intensifies the speaker's feelings of remorse (8-10). In fact, the speaker's guilt explains the use of second person point of view in the poem, in which the speaker distances himself even further from the subject, as if addressing the self-searching questions to a second person. For the speaker, this kind of emotional distancing is necessary; as the last two poems demonstrate, the idea

of infidelity bothers the speaker at least enough to cause him to rationalize his behavior, and later to question himself guiltily. For whatever reasons, the speaker is uncomfortable with his behavior, but not enough to change. Instead he removes himself emotionally to avoid feeling guilty.

The speaker's wife is not the only one with whom he emotionally distances himself, however. He must also deal with his lover, or perhaps more accurately, the situation forces him to confront his own emotions about her. Typically, the speaker maintains a cool facade rather than touch too near the heart of potentially explosive feelings. Snodgrass shows the speaker in this detached attitude as he and his lover are "Leaving the Motel" after one of their clandestine meetings. Instead of a bittersweet parting that might be expected, the business-like speaker briskly attends to a checklist of details to ensure that they will avoid detection: "Don't take / the matches, the wrong keyrings" (9-10); he cautions his lover to take no "ashtrays, combs, things / That sooner or later others / Would accidentally find" (12-14). He advises her matter-of-factly to leave only her license number "which they won't care to trace; / We've paid" (18-19). Even more unromantic--even suggesting tawdriness--is the idea that the room was rented out for only a few hours, before they leave they must "check: is the

second bed / Unrumped, as agreed?" (5-6). The speaker's disimpassioned demeanor no doubt protects him from what he might perceive as the emotional trap of commitment. Significantly, the speaker's comment as they leave, that next time they will "no doubt" use "other names" supports the idea of the speaker's fear of losing his identity in a love relationship (27-28). Just as his background has conditioned him to do, the speaker behaves coldly and unemotionally to protect himself from the hazards of emotional involvement.

The speaker seems capable of withdrawing from uncomfortable feelings, but he cannot always conveniently detach himself on schedule. For example, in "A Friend," the speaker outwardly yawns "over a stale joke book and beer," but inwardly conceals feelings of helplessness and anger as he visits--as just "a friend" (1)--the home of his lover, "our lady fair," and her husband "some troll" (5). As he evidently has many times in the past, the speaker plays familiarly with her children, until "their father, home tonight" tells them to "git," they are "bothering" the speaker (11-13); instead of protesting, the speaker merely nods because they had "better think he's right" (14). The speaker jealously notices that his lover's husband calls her "dear," as they watch, ironically, "some hokum on / Adultery and loss" on television (15-17); when he leaves, at "bedtime," he watches "that squat toad" plucking at her sleeve (19-20).

The speaker's intent scrutiny of those small details indicates his jealousy, but of course, he must say nothing. He drives home, unable to disconnect completely from feeling that his hypocrisy makes him a "Prince of Lies / Who's seen bliss" (22-23).

Snodgrass's rare use of shocking language (especially for 1959) to describe the speaker's perception of a savage landscape indicates the depths of the growing frustration and anger that the speaker sublimates to avoid confronting his emotions. Rather than recognize the source of the feeling of jealousy, the speaker curses the landscape. The speaker avoids acknowledging similarities, but like his father, he withdraws as a buffer against emotional conflict, which protects him from feeling out of control.

Similarly, in "Green Huntsman," the speaker avoids acknowledging his feelings about his lover, again preferring to dwell on the scenery, including the details of a hunt; but the juxtaposition of the subjects, and Snodgrass's use of imagery indicates that the landscape and hunt scene parallel the speaker's humiliation, from which he tries to withdraw. In the first of three stanzas, the speaker sits looking into a pond, visualizing his lover being taken back by her husband "as trolls / Snatch back their lovely own" (1-2). The troll imagery, incidentally, connects the husband and lover from "A Friend." The speaker

pictures the troll rising out of the "sour lagoon to snag" his lover (5), but is unable to see further because the "unblinking pond" goes "blind" (8). The speaker's self-deceptive blindness lets him avoid the obvious possibility, that his lover actively returned to her husband rather than passively being taken, as the troll comparison implies.

The speaker outwardly ignores the potentially painful facts, but his identification with the slain deer suggests that he responds inwardly. The speaker relates to "that twitching in the drenched grass" (11), betrayed, emasculated, and torn apart while "far, the untouched herd still bounds" (16). The third stanza finds him still looking blindly into the pond for his lover, but still unable to see further than the reflections of trees, and significantly, "those underwater plants that thrive / In slime and deep disgrace" (22). Finally the speaker realizes that he cannot even see his own face, a literal embodiment of the feelings of shame, loss-of-face, even loss of self, from which the speaker tries to withdraw.

In this particular poem, as in the previous two about the speaker and his lover, the speaker's conflicting feelings about love relationships cause him to ignore, withdraw from, or sublimate his emotional discomfort. He enters sincerely enough into relationships, but by emotionally withdrawing, he breaks spoken and unspoken contracts, such as fidelity,

mutual emotional support, and honesty. He neglects his emotional obligations to his wife by his disloyalty in the first place; he evades emotional responsibilities inherent in the second relationship by withdrawing emotional support when leaving the motel, for example, and ignores the potential consequences of having an affair with another married person. Unable to recognize the implications of the pattern of emotional dysfunction, the speaker simply avoids emotional conflict (even while he brings it on himself) and withdraws from responsibility instead of confronting it. If he could have fulfilled the emotional obligations of his marriage in the first place, chances are that the second relationship would not have even begun; however, while it lasts, involvement in both relationships enables the speaker to avoid fully dealing with either, thus perpetuating the cycle of emotional withdrawal in his next relationship.

In "Mementos 1 & 2" the speaker's own recollections provide no evidence that he took steps to salvage his first marriage before becoming involved with someone else, or that he took responsibility for the happiness of the marriage while it lasted. True to his early pattern, the speaker tends to see the break up of relationships as inevitable, blaming fate or others rather than accepting accountability, even long after the marriage dissolved. In fact, Mazzaro

attributes the speaker's emotional "affliction" to "a reluctance to forgive completely, a willingness to pretend to outside forgiveness, while inwardly he keeps blaming" (103). (Interestingly, this description also applies to the speaker's attitude about his parents.) In any event, both times after stumbling on "Mementos" of his first wife, the speaker prefers to remember her with nostalgia as the girl he idealized before they married, and only superficially examines concrete reasons for the failure of the marriage.

Conflicting imagery in the poems, however, betrays the emotional conflict still present in the speaker's consciousness. For example, in "Mementos, 1" when "that picture" turns up in a pile of old clippings "that meant something once," the speaker's dual reaction parallels his conflicting emotional associations with his ex-wife (3-4). On the one hand, he is "glad" to see the picture turn up (7), but on the other, he compares his shock at suddenly finding the picture to the horror felt by "a man raking piles of dead leaves in his yard / Who has turned up a severed hand" (3-6). A second juxtaposition of beauty and horror suggests the same inner conflict: First he describes in fond detail how stunning his ex-wife looked as a young girl at their first dance, "shy, delicate, slender / In that long gown of green lace netting and daisies" (8-9), and how he idealized her as he carried that picture "through the war" as a talisman to prove his civilian

life "had been, that it might come back" (13, 17); in contrast to the sentimental image, the speaker suddenly recalls Japanese "dead in their shacks" among debris (14). The connections between love and horror suggest the attraction and fear that the speaker links with love. In addition, the speaker's connection between love relationships and war (similar to that in "What We Said,") evokes memories of his father's militaristic world view.

The speaker does not recognize his role as a source of conflict within the marriage. After recalling how he idealized his ex-wife when they were young, the speaker says bluntly, "That was before we got married" (18), as if simply the fact of the marriage itself, instead of the actions of the people within it, were responsible for the "lies, self-denial," and "unspoken regret" that characterized the marriage of the speaker and his first wife (20). The speaker blames "the divorce / And the treachery" on the fact that he and his first wife married, as he says, "before we met" (21-22). Many couples, like the speaker, attribute marital problems to the fact that they did not know each other well when entering the marriage; however, unlike the narrator, others may have the emotional capacity and flexibility to learn from the marriage, instead of regarding the breakup as inevitable. Sadly, in the manner of a self-fulfilling prophecy, the speaker's relationships will be doomed,

as long as he cannot recognize and change his inherited behavior of avoidance and withdrawal.

Similarly, in "Mementos, 2" the speaker recalls his first wife--and then the circumstances of their divorce--after coming across a memento of her "in the third floor closet, / packed away" (2-3). The poem brings the speaker as close as he ever comes to admission of responsibility for the break up, but even here the real blame is put on his first wife. As in "Mementos, 1," the speaker finds objects--this time "that long white satin gown/and the heavy lead-foil crown"--that remind him of his first wife as the young girl he idealized when she was "Queen of the May / the goddess of our town" (8-9, 11-12). He sentimentally remembers details of "that brilliant hour" (13): How she stood, "exquisite, tall" (14), her hair "the beauty that would fall / to the boy who won" her (20-21). The Queen-of-the-May dress reminds the speaker that his first wife's "wedding suit / lies packed away" somewhere also, turning his recollections toward thoughts of their marriage. In the ambiguous third stanza the speaker comes to what he implies was the crux of the failure of the marriage: He speaks of "the fear my love might stain you / that would turn your face to scorn" (28-29), and of "the fear you could not love / that would tease and haunt you / till all that made me want you/would gall you" (30-33). Clearly, the

speaker refers to his wife's fears, with the particular wording suggesting that the fears related specifically to sexual problems. The suggestion is later reinforced by his statement that his wife still would prefer "to be courted, like a girl" (44).

If the speaker had not just blamed his wife's sexual inadequacies for their marital problems, he would seem to be admitting to responsibility, saying that his "love hung like a gown / of lead that pulled you down" (35-36); however, in context with his wife's alleged sexual problems, the statement only succeeds in shifting the blame toward her, if anyone. In addition, there is no evidence that the speaker actively tried to save his marriage before withdrawing from it and involving himself in a new relationship. By now the speaker has removed himself from his first wife so thoroughly that his description of her, "the hair and the eyes dull, / a grayness in the face--/ a woman with a daughter" (38-40), is as impersonal as a description of a stranger. The speaker withdraws from the responsibilities normally inherent in permanent relationships; and cyclically, that evasion of responsibility enables him to further distance himself emotionally. The previous poems show how the speaker shifts the responsibility of the relationship off himself by vaguely placing blame elsewhere--on the marriage itself in one instance, and on his wife's sexual problems, in the other.

Normally, however, the speaker does not bother shifting blame, because he does not blame himself for evading responsibility in the first place. While he feels guilt about resulting situations that arise, he regards his behaviour of emotional removal, if he regards it at all, as a survival reflex. As the following poems indicate, the speaker holds a very fatalistic view of permanent relationships. Although he really is lonely and searches for permanence, he believes that his actions will have no real effect, because his failure in relationships is already inevitable. Of course, in the nature of the cycle, once he avoids responsibility and emotionally withdraws himself from his partner, the break up of the relationship does become inevitable. For example, the speaker reveals some extent of his emotional fatalism in the poem "That Time" from After Experience by comparing the break up of yet another relationship to the inevitability of the change of seasons. As he explains to the "most dear" person with whom he is breaking up, to him it is simply "that time of the year,"

Birds take off for the South;
 My children fly back West,
 The leaves fly right straight down.
 And maybe, you most dear,...
 Maybe it's for the best.

The speaker suggests that he could no more change the outcome of the relationship than he could--or ought to--change the annual motions of the birds, his

children and the fall leaves. In the second and third stanzas the speaker interrupts himself with an odd military metaphor, which does not fit the tone of the rest of the poem, except to reinforce the idea of the inevitability of the yearly cycle: "Seasons return although / Men have to face the hour / The powers turn their back" (10-12). In fact, the military metaphor side-track is another of the speaker's methods of withdrawing emotionally from the break up, which takes place as the poem progresses. His contention of the inevitability of the break up begins to sound repetitious, "things have got to go. / This was just in the air / We knew this all along" (18-20), perhaps suggesting the speaker's difficulty in convincing "most dear" of the idea. For the speaker, however, it is not just a useful line for breaking off relationships; the longing in the speaker's tone when he says, "Some get a second chance. / I...I once knew your mouth" (22-23) suggests that he never really believes that he gets a second chance (or a first one, for that matter) because he believes that his relationships are destined to fail.

Similarly, in "Takeoff," the speaker discloses a fatalistic attitude about love as he wonders whether he should even bother to start a new relationship. The title "Takeoff" has a double meaning, referring both to the takeoff of the plane, and to the potential takeoff

of the new relationship; a similar double meaning applies when the speaker remarks both about the perspective of the earth from the plane and about the time spent with his new lover, saying "how soon things shrink away" (3). Perhaps honesty as well as the reluctance to begin a new relationship forces him to add, "I don't know whether I love you" (4). The speaker explains his reluctance saying even were they to "grow close till desire turned pure," they would still be only "gouging after some old / Grief, no love now will cure" (17-18). The speaker's previous relationships are now his "old griefs," and he fears that a new relationship would similarly fail, as he indicates by asking, "Suppose our loves did cross / Who knows where this could finish / What cravings we could cause?" (21-23).

In spite of the speaker's inclinations to start a new relationship, he fears it will end in grief. His final question, "Still, who would dare diminish / The loveliness or the loss?" (25), implies that he views "the loss" as inevitable, though perhaps worth the "loveliness." In the previous poem, Snodgrass depicts the speaker trying to decide whether love is worth the risk of almost certain heartache. Authentic human character that he is, the speaker usually risks everything for a chance at happiness, in spite of his underlying fear that the relationship will cause him grief. Unfortunately, the speaker's certainty of

failure allows him to justify emotional withdrawal, thereby sealing the fate of the relationship.

In the poem "No Use" Snodgrass creates a miniature of the continuing emotional cycle the speaker goes through. Resigned another break up, the speaker justifies emotional withdrawal by articulating the conviction that he can not succeed in love, though he feels compelled to keep trying: In the first stanza, the speaker justifies emotional withdrawal by assuming the relationship is hopeless, that "no doubt" the break up "is best" (1), presupposing otherwise that, "in time I'd learn / To hate you like the rest / I once loved" (2-4). The repetition of the words "No doubt"--first in the powerful initial position of both the first and second lines, and then twice at the end of the stanza as a refrain--reinforces the cyclic imagery within the stanza through their positioning, by recalling the theme at both the beginning and the end of the stanza. The emphatic quality of the words "no doubt" suggest the powerlessness the speaker feels against the certainty of the relationship's failure.

Naturally, emotional withdrawal itself damages the relationship, but instead, the speaker believes that luck, fate, or destiny predetermines the outcome of his romantic involvements, as he indicates by comparing himself to "that man the gods have curst" who can "always win / Love, as castaways get / Whole seas

to cure their thirst" (12-15). In spite of his doubts about success, the speaker admits that it's "no use telling us love's / No use" (17-18). He still hopes for the impossible, as the repetition of the words "and yet" (again, in the key initial and terminal positions) suggests, while reinforcing cyclical imagery within the stanza. Continuing the metaphor of thirst, the speaker reaffirms his need to carry on seeking love, saying his "parched, cracked" heart "drains that love it loves / And still thirsts" (18-19). Significantly, the words "no use"--again in the key positions for cyclic imagery--have the sense of affirmation at the beginning of the stanza, while in the refrain they ring with an ominous knell of finality. Finally, the words "no use" reinforce the suggestion of a cycle throughout the whole poem: The title of the poem, "No Use," recalls readers back to the beginning of the poem, where the speaker justifies his emotional withdrawal from the relationship.

In addition to showing the speaker's conflicting dual attitudes toward love as he breaks off one particular relationship, the poem "No Use" is in itself a tiny representation of the cycle that the speaker repeats in all his love relationships. Like in "That Time" and "Takeoff," in "No Use" the speaker never considers the idea that he could take action that would affect the outcome of the relationship, instead approaching love and marriage with the vague idea that

he might get lucky some day. Furthermore, his refusal to acknowledge partial responsibility in "Mementos, 1, and 2" shows that the perspective of time does not necessarily give the speaker any further insight into his own personality. Like "That Time," "Takeoff," and "No Use," the "Mementos" poems illustrate the speaker's tendency to evade responsibility in relationships: By blaming the marriage itself for its failure, by blaming his ex-wife, and most of all, by holding the fates ultimately responsible for his happiness in a permanent relationship.

Snodgrass's speaker does not persist in his destructive behavior for any advantage to himself. On the contrary, he longs for the security of the stable home environment he missed as a child, and his actions cause him, as much as anyone, difficulty and unhappiness. Thus he remains a sympathetic character in spite of the havoc he causes in the lives of others. The previous poems indicate that the speaker withdraws from relationships and resists responsibility in a manner similar to that for which he criticizes his father, but he ignores the implications of his actions in relation to a larger cycle of behavior. If he does not recognize the pattern he establishes in the previous fifteen poems, the speaker's blindness could be the fatal flaw that perpetuates the cycle of withdrawal: Falling in love with inappropriate or

unavailable partners in the first place; purposely emotionally distancing himself from those partners to shield himself from pain he views as inevitable; bringing on himself, by the ensuing damage to the relationship, the very pain he fears; then refusing responsibility for the damage, instead passively blaming fate; finally, repeating the cycle with other partners. The speaker ignores or actually does not perceive that his pattern of emotional withdrawal, with its similarities to his father's, implies the existence of a larger cycle of dysfunction; instead he continues his behavior, rationalizing his fear of intimacy instead of confronting it. The speaker's inherited relational difficulties prevent him from enjoying marital stability just as they keep him from a comfortable relationship with his parents: In both cases, unless the speaker recognizes the pattern and acts to change it, the cycle of emotional dysfunction will continue in the life of the speaker and be passed down to his children like a family curse.

Chapter IV

The Inheritance

The speaker's painful childhood taught him to avoid emotional pain by withdrawing from intimacy, and he follows the same philosophy in his role as a mate much to the detriment of his relationships; inevitably, the speaker must make decisions about how the cycle of emotional dysfunction will affect his role as a parent. The following poems depict the speaker's struggle to be a good father following a divorce from the child's mother, an attempt, in Robert Phillips' words "to make the most of this bad situation, our life, in which we have few choices, and those we have may prove destructive to those we love" (60). Ideally, to fulfill his responsibility as a father, the speaker must consider his daughter's emotional and material best interests: but he also has his own emotional needs and those of his new family to consider. In addition since the speaker understands first hand the potential damage of growing up in an emotionally unstable atmosphere, he worries about the possible effect of his emotional withdrawal on his daughter, naturally, hoping not to similarly handicap his own child.

To add to the dilemma, however, the speaker's history suggests that his gut-level response to the emotional pressure would be to withdraw from the child; and while society might pressure the speaker to support his daughter materially, he is under no legal obligation to continue an emotional relationship with her. The level of stigma attached to divorce in the 1950's, especially under the circumstances, precludes support for the speaker, who must carve out his role as a divorced father with few guidelines either from society or his emotionally unstable family background. Meanwhile, the speaker agonizes over compromises he must make between obligations to the child and his new family; between mixed feelings of love and guilt, and his need to emotionally withdraw from the child. Together the poems form a record of the speaker's struggle to be responsible as an absentee parent in spite of the influence of the speaker's family cycle of emotional dysfunction.

Robert Phillips notes connections between the poems in the Heart's Needle sequence and poems from other works, including After Experience, and Remains: Together the poems form a record of over three years in the speaker's strangely cyclical relationship with his child; in particular, the poems from After Experience carry over the cyclic theme and seasonal imagery that begins in the Heart's Needle sequence. William

Heyen remarks that the seasonal "ebb and flow" is one of the "inexorable cycles" that "dominate the speaker" (353), and in the context of the speaker's relationship with the child, the repetition of yearly cycles most obviously emphasizes the child's growth and change with the passage of time; in addition, the use of cycles alludes to the cyclical nature of family dysfunctions; on a third level, the inevitability of the seasonal cycle reintroduces the suggestions of the speaker's characteristic feelings of fatalism.

In the first four poems in the Heart's Needle sequence--forming the first yearly cycle--the speaker describes the year of the divorce, and implies surprising--considering the evidence of his other intimate relationships--awareness of the inherent emotional responsibilities to his child, and of his importance in helping form her emotional well-being. In the first poem, the speaker debates leaving his marriage, worrying about the effect a divorce would have on his daughter. Significantly, the speaker addresses this poem (indeed, the entire sequence) directly to the "Child of my winter" (1), suggesting a new willingness to communicate with his daughter that he often lacks in other relationships. Beginning the sequence with a poem set in winter, an image that usually suggests death or the end of the cycle, is appropriate for two reasons: First, the speaker's descriptions of his lover ("love I could not still")

and his marriage ("that cold war") make it clear that the death of the marriage is ultimately impending (5, 7); secondly, the bleak suggestion of winter's frozen soldiers and chilled tenant-farmers sets the tone of misery which prevails over the speaker for much of the sequence.

The speaker's conflict stems from his constant attempt to balance his own happiness with his daughter's emotional well-being. He wishes that he could keep his daughter's innocent mind as fresh as a "landscape of new snow" (10), but senses that the divorce will not leave the landscape "unmarked by agony" (18). In a curious turn of imagery, the speaker acknowledges his conscious influence on his daughter when he compares the pure winter landscape--of his child's mind--to a "spotless" white paper "spread / For me to write" (15-16). The speaker understands that whether he stays in the marriage enduring the "torments of demented summer" (22), or leaves to "increase the deepening harvest" of his love relationship (23), the decision will leave indelible impressions on the blank page of his child's mind. Naturally, most people consider the effect of their actions on their children, but for the speaker such consideration rather than automatic emotional withdrawal indicates a new level of emotional responsibility.

The speaker's concern for the emotional well-being

of his daughter prolongs his indecision, but by the time the action of the second poem takes place, in "late April," he has obviously decided in favor of the divorce (1). In another example of Snodgrass's unique inverted imagery, the garden they dig in the yard represents the child, while the child herself and "the damage" of her "play" suggest the catastrophe that the divorce will cause in the actual child's life: The "slender sticks" and "thin string" are small protection for the garden, just as the speaker's love and good intentions are small emotional protection for the actual child (5, 6); the speaker's confidence that the "seeds" in their "steadfast rows" will withstand the toddler's tramping and overwatering parallels his hopeful optimism that the actual child will weather the emotional trauma of her parents' divorce (10, 11). Similarly, when the speaker says "Child, we've done our best" (12), he refers, on the one hand, to himself and the child doing their best on the garden, and on the other hand, himself and his wife doing their best to protect their daughter from inevitable emotional pain.

In addition, the line encapsulates the speaker's bafflement at trying to explain the unexplainable facts of his own needs to the small child, as if with the hope of later understanding. In the final stanza, the speaker's statement that "someone" will have to weed and water "the young sprouts" acknowledges the familiar

bond of everyday care and contact that will be lost between himself and his child when he moves out of the house (13, 14). The advice the speaker gives the child (to "look" at the garden "every day") is really meant for himself: He should look at his child every day; just as he will be absent when the garden blooms, he knows that when his daughter comes to "full flower" he will "be away" (16, 17, 18). The speaker accepts separation from his child as the necessary consequence of the divorce, but unfortunately, the physical separation only emphasizes the potential for their mutual emotional alienation.

The rainy weather in the third poem suggests that it is still spring when the ordeal of custody arrangements takes an emotional toll on the whole family. In the first stanza, the speaker parallels his family situation to that of a couple on the street with a "child between them" (1): To swing the child over a puddle, the parents each grasp a hand, "stiffen and pull apart" (6); the momentary impression of the two parents pulling the child apart by the arms reminds the speaker of his own child, who could be pulled apart emotionally by the bitterness of the struggle between himself and his wife. In the next three stanzas the speaker uses war imagery to elaborate on the struggle, comparing himself and his wife as they battle over their daughter to "cold war soldiers" that "never

gained ground" and "gave none" (7, 8). The stalemate continues until, jaws clenched with tension, the speaker realizes with sudden clarity that "something somewhere has to give" (13). The speaker's tone of conviction is strengthened by the line's initial position in the stanza, as well as its perfect iambic meter among irregularly iambic lines. The "something" that "has to give" is the battle that the speaker and his wife wage over the rights to their child.

The speaker implies that he relinquishes the child for her own good: The war imagery emphasizes that from the child's point of view the divorce represents the catastrophic disintegration of her world; the speaker surrenders his daughter to live "in someone else's hands," fearing that his daughter, like the inhabitants of the burned towns, will become a casualty of someone else's war, especially if she remains--in part--its object (14, 15). Like the warring powers, the speaker and his wife finally agree to "sever and divide" their lives (19); they attend to the details of the divorce and try to resume living, just as the peasant from the war zone "plods back and reclaims / His fields" (23-24). The speaker again points out that his daughter's best interest motivates him to concede to his wife: The reference to accidentally dislocating his daughter's wrist in a "mere game" reinforces the speaker's fear of unintentionally damaging his child emotionally by turning her into "Love's wishbone" (29,

31).

The poem implies that the speaker takes the emotional responsibility to give up the child for her own benefit, although he, too, suffers as an emotional victim of the divorce. No doubt the speaker withdraws from battling over the child partly, as he claims, from the sincere desire to protect her from further emotional harm; admittedly, the speaker shows signs of taking responsibility, but unless he suddenly reverses his life-time habit of emotional withdrawal, he likely oversimplifies his position. In the first place, considering the speaker's history, and his anxiousness to start his new life, it is not surprising that emotional withdrawal would be his first impulse; perhaps guilt prevents him from acknowledging motives of self-interest. In the second place, the fact that the divorce largely benefits the speaker considerably weakens his stance as a victim who has "gone / As men must," letting his child be "drawn / Off to appease another" (31, 32, 33); in fact, considering the speaker's new family waiting in the wings, his identification with the mother in the story of Solomon seems almost sanctimonious. Admittedly, the speaker's actions are in part motivated by concern for his daughter's emotional well-being, but the predominate reality involves the complex and often conflicting elements that influence the speaker's attempt to fulfill his emotional responsibility to his daughter.

In the fourth poem, the final poem in the first year's cycle, the seasonal imagery emphasizes the communication gap that the speaker feels growing between himself and his daughter since their physical separation. In fact, the speaker feels frustration of communication even before he actually leaves, realizing the impossibility of explaining the divorce and his reasons for leaving to a three-year-old. He is able to explain that he "must leave" (4), but realizes that "no one can tell you why / the season will not wait" (1-2). The season, of course, is literally the Fall, in which the action of the poem takes place, but also refers to the season of the speaker's leaving. After leaving, the speaker evidently tries to maintain regular communication with his daughter; the familiar reference to "our walk" suggests that these short meetings are the only access to the child the speaker's ex-wife approves so far. Unfortunately, the speaker says not that he and his child talk as they walk, but that they "try to talk" (10); instead of using their "breath" for communication they "huff like windy giants" at dandelions (12, 13).

The speaker's frustration of communication occurs on different levels. For example, the speaker feels frustrated in his attempt to communicate hopefulness to his daughter: Although "the poet"

promises that "spring is the cold wind's aftermath" (14, 15), the present cold reality remains one of "ghost-gray" flowers, (17); similarly, the speaker realizes the uselessness of words to change the present reality of his absence from his child's everyday life. In addition, the "hunched sick and old" Fall scenery reminds the speaker that his frustration of communication now affects him even on the level of his writing (20): Broken "morning-glory vines"

still scrawl across their rigid twines.
Like broken lines

of verses I can't make (24-26).

Significantly, Snodgrass's speaker reinforces the idea of broken lines by forcing the grammatic sentence to break (between stanzas no less) directly after the words "broken lines." Not surprisingly, the speaker's difficulty with communication encourages the speaker's even further emotional withdrawal from his daughter, which, in a cyclic manner, even further undermines his own attempts at communication. Considering the child's age, and that she and her father no longer have day to day contact, it is not surprising that they would experience a degree of emotional distance from each other; however, the speaker seems to withdraw some of his sympathy for her, as well, as the slightly reductive descriptions

of the child's grief indicate: As he recalls, the night he left, she "wept a fearful rate" not because he left, but "to stay up late" (5-6); then in the final stanza the speaker compares the child's grief because he left to the grief of "a friend's child" who cried because "a cricket, who / had minstrelled every night outside / her window, died" (32, 33-35).

Trivializing the child's grief perhaps enables the speaker to diminish his own anxiety about the emotional rift between them, which problems of communication rapidly widen.

In the previous group of poems, forming the first yearly cycle, the speaker tries to balance his conflicting needs: He wants to fulfill his emotional obligations as a father, but physical absence makes that difficult; he would remedy the physical absence, but he fears a custody battle could emotionally harm his child; he would like a relationship with his daughter, but is discouraged by problems of communication. Furthermore, the speaker's involvement with his new family, as well as his characteristic habit of withdrawal, make a productive emotional balance difficult for the speaker to determine, let alone sustain.

In spite of the circumstances, the speaker hopes to be a better parent than--in his view--his parents were, to break the destructive cycle by ensuring his daughter a more stable childhood environment than he

had, presumably impossible if he withdraws too far emotionally. Through the next yearly cycle, the speaker continues his efforts to achieve equilibrium between his often conflicting responsibilities and needs. In the fifth poem it is "winter again," which sets the poem's time frame as approximately a year following the speaker's original plan for the divorce, reinforcing the cyclical nature of the sequence (1). The changes the speaker notices in his daughter--"still three," but "already growing / Strange to me"--emphasize the widening gap between them (2, 3-4): She now chatters of "new playmates" and sings "strange songs" (5, 6); she has forgotten the bedtime songs from the days before the speaker "went for walks" and "did not write" (9, 11, 12). In addition, the choice and prominent position of the word "growing" suggests that the child's rapid physical and mental development further emphasize the change in her relationship with her father.

The speaker's consistent pattern of emotional withdrawal in other relationships suggests that, weary from the ordeal of the divorce, and (as the repetition of the word supports) feeling his child grow "strange," the speaker will emotionally opt out of the relationship. Nonetheless, the speaker continues to visit the child, although--as he makes clear in the description of the hurt fox--not without cost to

himself. In fact, the speaker's identification with the fox implies a primal level of compulsion in his painful connection with his child: After conceding the child to escape the marriage, the speaker (who like the fox, "cannot feel"), returns to the child out of instinct, just as the fox returns to his gnawed off paw, which was "conceded to the jaw / Of toothed, blue steel" (23-24). The speaker recognizes that intellectual acknowledgement of responsibility aside, he instinctively returns to the hated place because of the beloved part of himself that remains there.

In the sixth poem the speaker tries to balance the conflict between his affirmation of the relationship and the factors that influence him to withdraw from the child, such as the painful associations she brings. Naturally, the first stanzas images of Spring, such as Easter, "thawed ground," and "an egg eyed lavender" suggest rebirth, growth, an affirmation of life (3-5); the speaker connects the images of affirmation to the life of the child in the next stanza by a description of the events leading to her first breath, how her "lungs, immersed"

in the womb, miraculously grew
 their useless folds till
 the fierce cold air rushed in to fill
 them out like bushes thick with leaves (11, 12-15).

In stanzas three through six, however, the speaker uses

imagery of the impartial and destructive side of Spring to suggest painful memories and associations that the child brings: The kildeers searching for their drowned nests, flying "all night over the mudflats crying" (24); the red-winged blackbird diving at the speaker with "frail wings" to protect her nest (26); the dead starlings in the debris of a "sharp windstorm" (33); the "proud, tan-spatted, buff-brown pigeon" snarled in a net (44).

The speaker's relation of painful associations in terms of different birds suddenly leads to a specific and personal example of painful memories the child brings, memories the speaker would "as soon forget" (48): Inverting the earlier affirmative image of the child's first breath, the speaker recalls visiting the child as she (eerily like his sister) "wheezed for breath, / for help" because her "lungs caught and would not take the air" (53, 56). The small but significant connection between the speaker's daughter and sister suggests the speaker's sympathy with his daughter, and implies the potential for inherited emotional, as well as physical, dysfunction. In addition, as in "The Mouse," the choice of the word "would" instead of "could" emphasizes the element of free choice. But in "The Mouse" the speaker chooses passive withdrawal for himself, while in contrast, in this sixth poem of the Heart's Needle sequence he advocates the active choice of survival for his daughter, reminding her that "Of

all things, only we / have power to choose that we should die" (57-58). Like the first two stanzas, the final two stanzas affirm new life, specifically the new lives that the speaker and his child must shape independently of one another.

The speaker recognizes that he asks as much, or more, emotional strength of his child as of himself, admitting that there were times he "could not raise / myself from bed how many days" (61-62). In any case, the speaker now understands that some emotional distance between himself and his child results as a necessary consequence of his choices: The speaker has "another wife / another child" (63-64); if the child is to survive emotionally intact, she must take action and "try to choose" her own life (64).

Of course, emotional decisions are seldom clear-cut, but that summer, in the seventh poem, the speaker specifically develops the idea of his daughter's increasing independence. The speaker's description of swinging his daughter in the "scuffled dust" of the playground clearly encapsulates his view of the transition that their relationship necessarily undergoes: To swing the child, the speaker "must / shove you away, / see you return again, / drive you off again" (3, 4-6); the motion of swinging (reinforced by the repetition of the word "again" and the rhythmic pauses created by caesuras) suggests the series of

small withdrawals and reconciliations that eventually will distance the speaker and the child. The child on the swing climbing "higher, farther from me, longer" (9), parallels the gradually increasing independence of the child from her father, which is, indeed, the goal of most parent/child relationships; however, particularly at such a young age, the difficulty lies in judging at just what point emotional withdrawal harms, instead of helps, the child: On the playground, the child will inevitably "fall back" to the speaker "stronger," from each push of the swing, returning with the constancy of a "bad penny" or "pendulum" (10, 11), but her response to the speaker's efforts at emotional balance cannot be as predictable.

Nevertheless, the language of the final stanza in the "blue July" poem suggests that for the first time in the sequence the speaker feels optimistic about his relationship with the child (13): The rich and detailed description of the "fat goldfinches" flying over "glittering, fecund / reach of our growing lands" suggests the heady clarity with which the speaker treasures the living moment, the "now, this second," in which he is able to "hold you in my hands" (17-18). The speaker's confidence suggests that that he and his child have reached a satisfactory balance between emotional withdrawal and support, if only for the moment.

Unfortunately, the clear and confident moments of

balance never last: In the eighth poem, closing the second yearly cycle in late Fall, the speaker still affirms the necessity of becoming less important in his daughter's life, but describes the difficulty of the transition for both himself and the child. The first eight stanzas summarize the progression of the speaker's relationship with his child from her first year to the present time: From the beginning the prevalent imagery of food emphasizes the speaker's role of provider of both physical and emotional nourishment, but his attempts to provide nourishment to the child--like his earlier attempts at communication--are often frustrated. For example, the speaker recalls that when his daughter was a baby she "would not tolerate" food (3), and trying to feed her was "no use" until the milk was "soured / with lemon juice" (2, 4-5); again later, the child rejects nourishment, chewing on "white, sweet clover" instead (9).

Further imagery of food conveys the speaker's early anxiety about fulfilling his parental responsibility: The speaker suggests that he was unable to respond to the child's imaginative request that he catch a star, "pull off its skin / and cook it for our dinner" because he was an "absentee bread-winner" (19-20, 21), and refers depreciatingly to restaurant meals and sack lunches he provided; then, as if falling back on his characteristic pattern of avoiding an

emotionally sore subject, the speaker withdraws for almost two stanzas into a catalogue of details about their trip to the park to feed the ducks, porcupine, fox and racoon. The speaker recalls his efforts to meet the bodily needs of his child, how he learned to fry "omelettes and griddlecakes" in order to set supper for her (35), but suggests that acting on emotional needs was more difficult: Previously the speaker had determined that a certain amount of emotional distance between himself and the child would best balance his conflicting responsibilities, but he could not bring himself to act on his intentions until he "built back from helplessness" after the emotionally wringing divorce (37).

The turning point, both of the poem and the father/daughter relationship, occurs at the end of the summary with the speaker's revelation that as he "grew able" to face the "only possible answer," he realized that the child must "come here less" (38, 39, 40). The remainder of the poem, set in the present tense, describes the problems of the child's (now) infrequent visits to her father's home. "This Hallowe'en" she visits for "one week" (41), masquerading, significantly, as a "fat, crossyeyed fox" (44): On the one hand, considering the speaker's previous identification with the fox, the costume suggests the father/daughter bond; however, on the other hand (as Robert Phillips points out), the very

fact that she is masked indicates the child's problem of establishing her own identity within the speaker's new life. In fact, even when unmasked, the child's identity is questioned by neighbors who "forget and ask / whose child you are" (49-50). The child's limited identity in her father's new life creates conflict for the speaker: He feels he must relinquish frequent contact with the child for the general good, but he still feels material and emotional responsibility to the child, and wants to keep some degree of control in her life.

By reintroducing food as a symbol of physical and emotional nourishment, the speaker insists on his role as provider when she visits his home, perhaps trying to compensate for the infrequency of the visits. The child, however, already grows independent, as she demonstrates by going "door to door / foraging for treats" (46-47). When the child "whine[s]", and "won't touch" her plate after eating too much Hallowe'en candy, she rejects not only the literal meal, but the speaker's efforts at emotional responsibility as well (52). Possibly that explains why the speaker, "as local law" (53), punishes the child rather harshly for the infraction, confining her at meal time to an "orange crate" table in her "own room for days" (54-55). On the whole, the poem suggests that neither the speaker nor the child enjoy the Hallowe'en visit: As

the speaker notices the child grating her jaw in her sleep he thinks remorsefully, "Assuredly your father's crimes / are visited / on you. You visit me sometimes" (58-60); the inversion of imagery (a product of the repetition and emphasis of the word "visit") implies that the speaker views the child as kind of an embodiment of his own father's "crimes"; in other words, just as the child suffers for the speaker's actions, so the speaker feels "visited on" by problems with the child as almost an inevitable result of the cycle of emotional dysfunction which began--at least from the speaker's perception--with his father's crimes.

As the visit ends, the image of the child breaking a "crust of snow / off the runningboard to eat" again suggests her increasing independence from her father as provider (65-66). While the speaker understands the necessity of the child's increasing independence, even advocates it according to last summer's poem, he has difficulty releasing emotional control, fearing losing her completely if he withdraws too far. After the child leaves, the speaker conveys some of his mixed feelings by comparing the child to "sweet / foods" that he craves even though they rot his teeth, and her absence to the "cavities" that sweets leave behind (69, 70). In the previous group of poems, forming the second yearly cycle, the speaker tries to balance conflicting and increasingly complicated needs: The

speaker feels an instinctual level of connection to the child, but she also reminds him of things he would prefer to forget; the speaker believes that his relationship with the child must change to maintain the most equitable emotional balance, but when interacting with the flesh and blood child instead of planning an abstract idea, he finds the transition painful for both himself and the child.

The crisis occurs at the beginning of the third yearly cycle, approximately two winters after the initial decision for the divorce; the speaker ("numb" although the weather is not "very cold") (1, 4), hits an unsurpassed low point in the relationship with the child, whom he has not seen for "three months" (9). Obviously bitterly depressed, and feeling a failure at balancing the conflicting emotional needs of the child and his new family, the speaker withdraws from the child with a vengeance: When a friend asks how she is, the speaker does not know, does not "see much right to ask," or "what use it could be to know" (7, 8); however, the speaker cannot withdraw from the child without being troubled by guilt.

As both William Heyen and Robert Phillips point out, the display of "enduring and resigned stuffed animals" in the museum is a microcosm of the speaker's world; specifically, the animal tableaux parallel the "displacement and / known treachery" the speaker fears

inevitable in emotional relationships (20-21): The "little bobcats" "still practicing their snarl / of constant rage" remind him of his child and her stepsister after their "first, worst quarrel" (31, 34, 35-36); the speaker, like the bison, wonders what "his calf" is "thinking now" (38, 40), and, perhaps referring to the meal incident at Hallowe'en, wonders why he "forced" her to "obedience" (41). Furthermore, the speaker's ex-wife, like the "lean lioness," "stands watching always at the edge," "envious" of the speaker's influence on "her cub" (43, 46, 47, 48); like the horn-locked elk, the speaker and his ex-wife "stand bound" in "lasting hate" and "equal weakness" (50, 51, 53); and the isolated polar bear, "separate in the ocean / of broken ice" is like the speaker, who withdraws into alienated numbness to avoid conflict and guilt (55).

The animal groups, forever locked into positions of aggression, suggest the speaker's growing fears that the failure of the relationship with his child is inevitable. The animals obviously stand "arrested here" because they are stuffed (59), but the people remain "paralyzed at bay" because they have "stood so long / at war, shaken with hate and dread" (61-62), that they are now unable to "grow reasonable and strong" (65). It is inevitable, the speaker suggests bitterly, that the relationship with the child, like the hard won "costly fields" of Carthage, now sown with

salt, will grow "nothing but injury" (70), producing as its only fruit the "bitter poems / that you can't read" (71-72).

Growing increasingly morose, the speaker continues his identification with the museum exhibits, but now with the unexplainable growths and deformities, suggesting the extent of the bitterness which colors his view: In this dark world, "unchanging, where no eye shall mourn" (83), the child becomes the preserved "putty-colored children" and the dead, caul-wrapped kitten (80); the speaker is "joined forever" in a relationship that "none shall sever" (94), like the monstrous "two-headed foal" and "Siamese twin dogs" (87, 93). The speaker's view of despair and self-loathing increases as he walks among the "gangrenous tissue, goitre, cysts / by fistulas and cancers" (98-99): He feels that "the malignancy man loathes" is "suspended and persists" within himself (100, 101); like the bear in its "ocean of broken ice", the "diseased heart / packed with ice and snow" represents the speaker, withdrawn in the chill of his numbing depression (104-105).

In the final three lines, the speaker comes to the crux of his conflict: He cannot overcome his guilt at not seeing the child for over three months when they live "less than a mile" apart (107); yet, he feels powerless to change his stance, like the motionless

museum animals, he "cannot fight / or let you go." (107-108). The speaker's contact with the child (motivated partly by the primal instinct illustrated by the fox and trap image, and partly by his hopes to be an emotionally responsible parent) is discouraged by the child's mother, the speaker's conflicting obligations to his new family, and the speaker's own tendency to withdraw under stress. On the one hand the speaker understands that under the circumstances less contact between himself and the child is necessary, but on the other hand, he is reluctant to give up emotional control. Finally, after almost two years, feeling a failure as a parent, the speaker tries to escape the conflict altogether, by emotionally withdrawing from the child; instead of freeing him from guilt, however, the previous poem indicates that the speaker's decision causes him a degree of self-hatred that brings him to an emotional ebb.

In the nature of the cycle, however, in the tenth poem of the Heart's Needle sequence "the vicious winter finally yields / the green winter wheat" (1-2). The line break after the word "yields" emphasizes the double meaning of the word: In one sense, the relentless winter yields, or surrenders its hold on the speaker; in another sense, the winter yields, that is to say produces, growth, both in the wheat and in the speaker. Still fresh from the winter's ordeal, but

newly hopeful, the speaker emphasizes the inevitable return of the cycle to spring, using imagery of birth and growth to affirm a renewed relationship with his daughter: For example, instead of the destructive side of the season, the speaker notices "prevailing / piglets" with their sow, and colts following their mares around the pasture. Reinforcing the cyclical aspect with the imagery of circles, the speaker closely follows the image of the circling horses with the observation that "like merry-go-round horses," the season brings he and the child "back once more" both to each other, and to the scene of many past visits, the park (11-12).

Again affirming the season of growth and birth, the speaker reports that Spring comes to the park with "crocus mouths" and "perennial hungers" (13). The reference to "perennial hungers" refers not only to the appetite of the famished spring crop of young animals and plants, but to the old longings of the speaker for an emotionally nourishing relationship with his child. Especially in context with the previous poems, the image of the speaker and child roasting "hot dogs on old coat hangers" together clearly indicates a renewal of emotional interaction, but with a new level of independence for the child, now five (15). In addition, the cyclic return to the familiar ritual of feeding the park animals eases the speaker and daughter

into a new phase of growth following the "vicious winter" of their relationship; the description of hungry rabbits, racoon, and fox is no longer a mere catalogue of details, but is instead a reappearance of old friends, a mutual point of reference at which to begin the renewed relationship between the speaker and the child.

Just as Spring inevitably returns to the park, the speaker implies that his relationship with his child will return toward the balance he hoped for last July. The image of the "miniature painted train" circling its "oval track" is especially significant: In the first place, the oval shape of the track itself suggests a cycle; secondly, like the movement of the swing in the "blue July" poem, the movement of the train (constantly alternating between opposite ends of the oval) suggests the series of separations and reunions, withdrawals and reconciliations which eventually occurs in all parent/child relationships. In addition, the speaker further emphasizes the point by connecting the miniature train image with child's trip to--and back from--Pennsylvania. Last winter, estranged from the child, the speaker despaired of the outcome of the relationship; however, "once again this April," in spite of external and internal pressures, the speaker and the child "come around" to each other, as well as the bears (31-32). Thus, the tenth poem ends the Heart's Needle sequence on a note of affirmation.

Although Snodgrass makes the artistic choice to end Heart's Needle, on an affirmative note, he continues exploring families and cycles with another change of season for the speaker and child in "Reconstructions" and "The First Leaf" (After Experience), and in a final perspective from the speaker in "To a Child" (Remains). The title "Reconstructions" works on different levels: In one sense the poem itself reconstructs specific incidents, just as together the poems reconstruct the speaker's relationship with the child; in another sense, the speaker indicates that the child reconstructs her life around the trauma of the last two-and-a-half years. For example, the speaker remembers the child's comment that after she left "if no one watered" her plant "and it would die" she "didn't mind" (3, 4); as he did in the fourth poem of the Heart's Needle Sequence, the speaker reacts unsympathetically to the pathos of the child's remark, saying cynically that she means to "play the zinnia / In some sorry melodrama" (5-6). It is likely that the speaker withdraws from feeling sympathetic to try to avoid guilt that would naturally occur upon recognizing both his ex-wife and himself in the child's reconstructions, which also reveal frightening similarities to the behavior for which he criticizes his own parents.

For example, the speaker recalls how the child one

day offered her doll to him:

And said that it was her birthday;
 You reappeared then, grabbed her away,
 Said just don't mess with her at all;
 It was your child, yours (9-12).

The speaker might agree that the child's version of his ex-wife is familiar, and perhaps even acknowledge the similarity to the emotionally manipulative methods of his own mother; however, certainly it is harder for the speaker to acknowledge the cruelty of the child's interpretation of his emotional withdrawal, and its resemblance to the behavior of his own father: She would "tell the dog he had to 'Stay!'"

Then always let him sit
 There, ears up, tense, all
 Shivering to hear you call;
 You turned and walked away (14-18).

In spite of emotionally distancing himself, the speaker admits that he himself cannot escape rehearsing the "old unbearable scenes" any more than the child can (20); however, she turns her "grief into play" (26), while the speaker turns his to work, memorizing her "bit by bit, / And must restore you in my verses / To sell to magazines" (22-24). The speaker's and his ex-wife's behavior parallels that of the speaker's parents, suggesting that the speaker worries about his failure to be more emotionally responsible than his own parents, particularly in the area of emotional support. After the struggle of the last years, the speaker now seems resigned to the idea that an emotional

relationship with his child is not something which "our times allow" him to "keep" (25); as his background suggests he might, he responds by emotionally distancing himself from the child for his own and his new family's emotional protection. The speaker's remark in the final line, that "we've given the dog away" indicates that the child will be an even less frequent visitor, and makes a point of his detachment toward the child's pet (28).

The intimation that the child will visit less frequently is explained in "The First Leaf." As in the other poems about the speaker and child, the references to the season, among other things, emphasize the passage of time; in fact, the speaker's mention of the child's "six-year-teeth" indicates that that the poem is set a year-and-a half later than the last poem in Heart's Needle, telescoping two yearly cycles into the last one. As the title implies, instead of growth and renewal, the subject of the "The First Leaf" is departures, withdrawals, and endings. The child now lives elsewhere with her mother (perhaps in Pennsylvania), and visits the speaker only summers; significantly, the poem begins as the child's visit to the speaker ends, as they "drive off" to the train station saying "what has to be said" before she leaves (1, 4). Although the speaker is not completely remote from the child, he withdraws from her throughout the

months she is away ("autumn, winter and spring") to the extent that their "usual letter" is counted by seasons (5-6): "One month for each finger. / And this makes you feel better" (7-8). In addition, as the previous quotation illustrates, the poem's many terminal trochees work two ways: In the first place, they reinforce the idea of endings and withdrawals by putting metrical emphasis on actual endings of lines; in the second place, the rythmical effect of the terminal trochees within the mainly iambic poem (as Paul Fussell points out) is to add to the speaker's increasingly sardonic tone.

The speaker laments the child's departure, saying unhappily, "Next year we'll hardly know you" (17), but recognizes that the emotional distance between himself and his daughter will inevitably exist as long as "all the blame endures" between himself and his ex-wife (18); in addition, the speaker understands that he must withdraw from the child in order to "have a life" with his second wife. In any case, the speaker withdraws from the child at the train station, retreating first into a fanciful comparison of a cattle truck with foreign soldiers, then into sarcasm, as the child literally departs. Irony--again emphasized by terminal trochees--clearly permeates the remark that he now can "earn a living / By turning out elegant strophes" (21-22). The speaker implies controlled deliberateness about the withdrawal from the child: As the "train

pulls down its track" moving the child inevitably away, the speaker and his wife "go about" their "business" (27). In spite of the speaker's history of emotional withdrawal, the flat statement that he has "turned" his "back" on the child is difficult to reconcile with the agony of their first separation (28).

Although the speaker definitely withdraws from the child, "To a Child" from Remains reveals that he cannot completely turn his back as he claims in "The First Leaf." Using the contrasting imagery of life and death, the speaker continues to try to make sense of the damaged family relationships; in addition, the imagery--contrasting, yet cyclic in nature--reinforces earlier suggestions about the cyclic nature of the family's relational problems. In "To a Child," the speaker, his new family, and the child visit his parents' home on the occasion of his sister's funeral; ironically, at this time of death, the speaker's second wife (the same age as his dead sister) is pregnant, and it becomes necessary for the speaker and child to "talk our talk / About the birds and the bees," as well as to discuss death (5-6).

Two sexual incidents reinforce the theme of birth and life: First, (coincidentally, according to the speaker) the place the speaker and the child talk is where "Some twenty years ago I lay / With my first girl" (9-10); he then recalls a riverbank he and the

child used to go, and how the child thought the "lovers" who "lay / Abandoned in each others' arms" were napping (14-15). Contrasting the images of sex with images of death, the speaker suggests that, like the subject of sex and birth, the child knew relatively little about death before her aunt died: Cemeteries were places the speaker and the child would sit on "stones to sing" or to decipher "dark / Names carved" (20, 23-24). The child's only previous understanding of death was through animals: She had seen a dead toad, "run over on the graveyard road" (21), and when the child's turtle died "we said that ought to make the garden fertile" (30), but the child, of course, would not have understood the larger implications.

The child also knows something about families through animals; they used to feed the familiar park animals in the "childrens' zoo," the refuge of "the newborn, hurt or tame," (34, 35). The speaker recalls that the child felt sorry for the "bantie chick" (37), perhaps identifying with it as it scurried after an "indignant hen / That fled" (41). At this point, as if the mere sight of the fleeing hen accuses him of avoiding his own emotional responsibility, the speaker mentions that he tried to communicate by sending the monthly "long letters" even though the child was "still too young to read" (43, 44); he recalls the different tree seeds he sent, "maple wings" and "linden gliders" which, like the child herself, must find what they need

"far from the parent tree" (45, 46, 54).

Unfortunately, the speaker and the child could not maintain their relationship through the mail because "they" (his ex-wife's family, perhaps) "threw my letters out / Said I had probably forgotten" (55-56). The speaker hates his ex-wife for the manipulative withholding of the letters, which she probably justified by saying it was for the child's good. He compares her hypocrisy to "the glow of rotten / Wood" (57, 58), and the "glimmering" "flesh of a dead trout" (59). The speaker's need to explain the lack of communication between himself and the child indicates that he has not emotionally withdrawn, at least not permanently, from his child to the extent that he indicates in "The First Leaf."

Still using plant and animal imagery, the speaker connects his own dysfunctional background to the subject of the estrangement between himself and the child, implying the cyclic nature of emotional dysfunction: For example, the child's mother--just like his own mother--"thrives" on a "close embrace" of those around her, much like the "pale white parasitic love-vine" (62, 64); the child sees the speaker, just as the speaker sees his father (both "grown men"), "debase / Themselves for their embittered wives" 65, 66); in addition, in a horrible allusion to his opinion that his sister was emotionally smothered by his

mother, the speaker refers to an "old sow" that he and the child have seen "smother the sucklings in her sty" then "devour her own farrow" (67, 68, 69). Having grown up with dysfunctional behavior, and having perpetuated it himself in his relationships, the speaker realizes that he is not qualified to advise his daughter about love; he knows that "without love we die; with love we kill each other" (71-72), and his choices suggests that it is better to die because of love than to die lonely.

The speaker's chance to share some of his history and values with his child warms his sympathy for her. He understands the weight of her new knowledge of the inevitable cycles of birth and sex and death, and that the child is "afraid, now, of dying; sick with change and loss" (73). For the first time she feels the "small life toss" in her "step-mother's womb" and fears that someone will take her room while she lies "still in the ground" (75, 77, 78). Thus, in "the summer's lull" the speaker reassures the child as he explains the processes that are the bonds of all humanity; he tries to soothe her fears of death and to explain "how, and why" her "brother / Will be born" (79, 81, 82). "To a Child," like the final poem in the Heart's Needle sequence is an affirmation, though an affirmation of love in general more than of their specific relationship. In spite of the inevitable cycles of "change and loss" the speaker clearly affirms that

"love is possible," and further advises the child that "we have to try" (83-84). If he can convince the child to reach out to love in spite of herself, in spite of her mother's manipulative behavior, and in spite of his own emotional withdrawal, he will be satisfied that he was at least partly successful as an an emotionally responsible father and, certainly with odds against him, at trying to end the family cycle of dysfunction.

Chapter V

Conclusion

When Heart's Needle was published in 1959, critics termed it "confessional" poetry because of its personal and--at that time--startling subject matter; however, in today's society of increased mobility, no-fault divorce, rapidly changing (and often distintegrating) family structure, Snodgrass's works reflect concerns of exponentially growing numbers of people. Snodgrass himself does not find "confessional" poetry a "useful term" (Dillon, 278), but the fact that he devotes over a third of his works to explore dissolving family relationships indicates his interest in modern family dynamics. In particular, Snodgrass examines cyclic perpetuation of family dysfunction by examining the speaker's interactions with his parents, spouse(s), and child.

Dysfunction often continues cyclically because children learn it from, or in reaction to, the behavior of their parents: The speaker's descriptions of his parents implies that emotional withdrawal was adopted by him as a coping mechanism during his unhappy childhood and is now habitual. The speaker's feelings of alienation during his military leave first suggest the speaker's deliberate emotional withdrawal from his

family; detailed descriptions of his parents leave no doubt about the speaker's hostility: According to the speaker, his mother obsessively martyrs herself in order to manipulate the other family members; meanwhile, the father, constantly preoccupied with maintaining the balance of emotional power, withdraws from all sympathetic connections to avoid the weakness of dependence.

Although the speaker justifies his own withdrawal from responsibility, he strongly criticizes his parents' behavior, which he views as the source of his sister's, and by inference, his own, relational problems. In fact, the speaker implies that his sister, dead at twenty-five, was literally killed by emotional bullying and toying, especially the mother's clinging and demands, which the speaker represents in terms of suffocation. The speaker's criticism of the funeral and the disposal of the sister's possessions further suggests disapproval of his parents' treatment of his sad, mouse-like sister.

Significantly, the speaker never mentions his own influence on his sister, presumably because he withdrew from her as well as his parents. Instead of mourning the loss of his sister, or determining to forgive (or at least come to terms with) his parents, the speaker

withdraws into passivity and fault-finding. Of course, it is difficult to change, but it is ironic that the speaker repeats the very behavior for which he condemns his father; in addition, the speaker justifies his behavior, rather than taking action to change it, by shifting the blame to his parents.

When the speaker and his new wife visit his parents (a year after his sister's death) imagery of suffocation, decay, and blindness suggests the speaker's sustained bitterness against his parents; he even implies that his sister's death was her declaration of independence against the tyranny of their parents. Meanwhile, the speaker continues--if somewhat inconsistently--to justify his own withdrawal from responsibility by alluding to his victimized childhood, on the one hand, and his fatalistic world view, on the other. Whether or not the speaker is a victim of his childhood, the criticism of his parents' behavior is meaningless unless followed by concrete attempts to modify his own behavior. If the speaker wants his future relationships to be healthier than his family's, then he must take control of life, take action instead of shifting the responsibility to others or his ambiguous fate.

The cyclic nature of dysfunctions becomes increasingly apparent in the speaker's relationships with romantic partners: The speaker's background causes him to harbor inner conflicts about permanent

commitment; in fact, the emotional removal that characterizes his relationship with his parents also threatens the stability of his long-term relationships. The speaker's feelings about love and marriage alternate between confidence and cynicism, hope and fear. He enters into his first marriage with good intentions, but withdraws at the first signs of trouble, breaking such traditional marital contracts as honesty, emotional support, and fidelity, in the process; naturally, the speaker's emotional defection only intensifies the existing marital problems.

As Snodgrass reveals, the speaker's habitual withdrawal damages his relationship with his lover, as well as his wife: In the first place, the speaker's involvement in two relationships enables him to more easily to avoid responsibility for either one or the other; in addition, his certainty of inevitable pain leads the speaker to ignore, avoid, or sublimate relational problems. Furthermore, just as in his marriage, speaker's behavior itself brings about (or at least encourages) the loss against which the speaker steels himself by withdrawing.

In his relationship with a spouse, just as in his relationship with his parents, the speaker does not recognize personal responsibility for his own happiness; instead he vaguely blames his wife's sexual problems or his unlucky destiny, shifting the

responsibility off himself, in any case. Ironically, Snodgrass indicates that the speaker's learned behavior of withdrawal (similar to that for which he criticizes his father) most significantly contributes to the difficulty with intimate relationships that persists in the speaker's adult life. At this point, the speaker's thoroughly ingrained habit of withdrawal is like a fatal flaw which will inevitably be the speaker's source of grief as a parent.

Finally, inevitably, Snodgrass presents the speaker in the role of the father, placing the much acclaimed Heart's Needle sequence into perspective with the larger concerns of dissolving families and the cyclic nature of their disorders. The speaker's history suggests that his first response to the pressure of the divorce would be to withdraw from the child; in addition, the speaker is pressured by his ex-wife, his new family, and even society to some extent, to emotionally distance himself from the child. The speaker, however, showing surprising new depths of responsibility as a father, is determined to consider his daughter's emotional best interests as well as her material support, unlike his own parents. Naturally, the speaker worries about the effect of a divorce--and the resulting emotional trauma--on the child. The poems record the speaker's struggle to overcome his family background and the circumstances of the divorce, and, to the best of his ability, to act responsibly, even--

as an absentee parent.

Snodgrass's use of yearly seasonal imagery in the Heart's Needle sequence emphasizes the role of the sequence as part of a cycle, implies the speaker's feelings of determinism, and recalls the passage of time, which brings growth and change to both the speaker and child. During the first year of the divorce, the speaker strives to balance his needs and obligations with the physical absence from the child, the ordeal of the divorce and custody proceedings, and his frustration of communication with the child. The second yearly cycle brings increasingly complicated needs: The speaker must balance, on the one hand, love and feelings of instinctive connection to the child with, on the other hand, her growing need for independence and his need to withdraw from the painful associations brings.

In addition, the speaker intellectually concludes that increasing the emotional distance between himself and the child is necessary, but acts reluctantly on his conclusions, not yet willing--or completely able--to relinquish emotional control of the child. Again, the seasonal imagery emphasizes the cyclical change in the speaker's relationship with the child. For example, the miserable, frozen third winter of the sequence reinforces the speaker's feelings of failure as he withdraws from the child to escape the relentless

conflict their relationship causes him. Similarly, the final poem ends the sequence on a positive note by affirming the relationship in terms of spring-like renewal and growth. Seasonal imagery and cyclical themes continue the repetition of the "inexorable cycles" outside the sequence, suggesting the gradually widening and inevitable distance which divides the speaker and child (Heyen, 352): For example, the determined, resigned withdrawal from the child at the train station recalls--but less drastically--the desperate winter withdrawal in the sequence; similarly, the speaker's final affirmation of love parallels--though more tentatively--the April renewal of the sequence.

The speaker never completely resolves his conflicts about intimacy: In spite of his unsuccessful relationships, the speaker directly affirms the possibility of love and the necessity to strive for it; however, he also speaks plainly about its potential deadliness, and makes no claims to understand the answers any more than he understood them in the agonizing winter of the sequence. The speaker's tenuous balance of conflicts, even at a moment of affirmation, suggests his overall tragic view of life; yet the speaker still has not lost the will to believe that the potential for love exists. The speaker regrets his failure to provide his daughter with the secure childhood he missed, realizing that his child's short

life has been relatively unhappy on his account. The speaker, of course, knows from personal experience that nothing can erase the painful memories of childhood, but he can still do his best to break the influence of the cycle by helping the child see that the possibility of love exists.

The speaker does not want to raise false hopes in the child about the world; he does not promise that the child will find love--merely the potential exists. In context with the speaker's family and marital history, the ability to convey even the possibility of love to the child suggests the speaker's best effort to transcend the cycle of dysfunction in his relationship with his child. In the poems tracing the speaker's intimate relationships, including with his parents, love relationships, and child, the poet Snodgrass offers no more concrete answers to the problems of love and emotion than does his speaker, perhaps sensing that answers of this nature must come from within. For those unfamiliar with the idea of family emotional dysfunction, Snodgrass's examination of dissolving families--and in particular damaged and broken relationships--clearly relates the history of a family's disorder and mutual emotional alienation; sadly, however, more and more people today share the experience of Snodgrass's speaker.

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