

Leon S. Anisfeld, D.S.W.
750 Kappock Street, Apt. A2
Riverdale, New York 10463

Book: Haunted by Parents

Author: Leonard Shengold, M.D.

This book's interest develops out of the author's earlier writings on the subject of "soul murder", a concept originally applied to victims of child abuse but more broadly applied, here, as intrusion on the developing child's psychic self by parents in such a way as to foster the child's continuing dependency and to inhibit his creative growth. Although Shengold's interest arises from the observation that certain patients in clinical practice seemed unable to profit from treatment because therapeutic change threatened their dependent attachment to the parental figure, in Haunted by Parents he offers biographical sketches of famous historical figures and characters, among them the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, Dr. Benjamin Spock, Leonard Woolf, Sergei Aksakoff, a 19th century Russian writer, and others. In addition, he discusses Henrik Ibsen's characters, Nora of A Doll's House, and the eponymous Hedda Gabler.

All the figures under discussion had dominant and dominating mothers to whom they were in various ways in thrall. One might expect that, given the conditions of their childhoods, these individuals would have been blocked from their ambitions or unable to reap the rewards of their talents. Some of the sketches would seem to point to an inability to function in the absence of the mother's controlling presence. Spock, for example, an outspoken pediatrician who demystified the art of parenting and child care, a social crusader, and a well-known opponent of the Viet Nam War, is said to have been able to pursue his causes only if he was confident that his beliefs were in keeping with his mother's values.

Shengold's theory of children under the influence of controlling mothers might be expected to illustrate the defeat of the child's innate drive toward independence. His portraits are of people significantly controlled by fears of loss when faced with the possibility that their ideas and/or ambitions would conflict with maternal imperatives. Yet, surprisingly, these individuals were able to rely on unexplained resources or resilience to achieve great things.

Shengold's biographies read more like short stories than case studies. They are unexpectedly reassuring. Rather than portraying lives ruined or tragic, as a result of unforgivable or unforgiven parents, they are uplifting stories of accomplishment, of lives not so much haunted as molded by unpredictable circumstances.