

# Eric Berne – a short biographical sketch

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**“Devilish, witty, naughty”, “very shy” and “of genius capacities” are all peer descriptions of Eric Berne. Who was Eric Berne and what can we learn from his brief, but very full, life?**

## Early years

Leonard Eric Bernstein (later Berne used Lennard) was born on 10 May 1910 at his family home in Montreal, Canada. He was born into a Jewish family, who lived in a pleasant area of Montreal where half the residents spoke English and the other half French (Jorgensen & Jorgensen, 1978). Berne had one sister, Grace, who was five years younger. His family were comparatively well off, lived in a beautiful home, had servants, and paid for their two children to be privately educated at Montreal High School.

Berne’s father, David Hillel Bernstein, was a well-known and well-respected doctor. He founded the Herzl Clinic, a free clinic, for Jewish immigrants and refugees. David’s father had emigrated from Poland and was a travelling optometrist, colloquially known as “the glasses man” (Jorgensen & Jorgensen, 1978, p.177). Berne’s mother, Sara Gordon Bernstein, was a teacher and journalist, who encouraged the young Berne to write. She was born in Pinsk, Russia, and brought to Canada by her mother. Later her father, who went AWOL from the Czar’s army, managed to join his wife and daughter. In Canada, Sara’s father initially worked as a gravedigger and then set up a second hand furniture and antique store (Jorgensen & Jorgensen, 1984). Berne’s parents were both graduates of McGill University in Montreal.

Berne admired and looked up to his father, even going out on medical rounds with him on occasions. Perhaps it was hardly surprising that Berne himself would decide to become a doctor. Berne’s father caught the World War I influenza in 1918, which developed into tuberculosis. He died in February 1921 when Berne was only ten years old.

Anti-semitism in Montreal was rife eg there were notices at public beaches saying “Gentiles Only” and signs in hotels stating “No dogs or Jews Allowed”. The Bernstein family certainly experienced anti-semitic “attacks” first hand. For example, Berne’s mother lost her job as a teacher at a protestant school, when the school board discovered she was Jewish. It has also been reported that when Berne was young he

experienced being spat at by French Canadian youth (Jorgensen & Jorgensen, 1984). In addition, Berne moved to the United States of America in 1935, as he narrowly missed out on obtaining one of only two places available for Jewish interns each year in the Montreal hospitals (Jorgensen & Jorgensen, 1984). It is likely that Lennard Eric Bernstein changed his name to Eric Berne, circa 1943, as a result of the prevailing anti-semitic attitudes in Canada and America.

## Education and early work history

Berne graduated from McGill University in 1931. He then gained the degrees of Doctor of Medicine (MD) and Master of Surgery (CM) from McGill University Medical School in 1935. He undertook his internship at Englewood Hospital, New Jersey from 1935-36 and from 1936-38 he did a psychiatric residency at Yale University School of Medicine (Jorgensen & Jorgensen, 1984).

From 1938-40, Berne was an assistant physician at Ring Sanitarium, Arlington Heights, Massachusetts, and from 1940-43 he was employed as a psychiatrist in a sanitarium in Connecticut, and concurrently as a clinical assistant in psychiatry at Mt Sinai Hospital in New York. He also maintained a private practice. In 1943, Berne joined the United States Army Medical Corps. He rose from the rank of Lieutenant, to Captain, and then to Major. During his time in the army, Berne was based at several different hospitals within the United States. After he was demobbed in July 1946, Berne decided to move to Carmel, California.



*At times there would be seven children in the Berne household.*

## Wives and children

Berne was a man of his times ie the 1940s, 50s and 60s, who held “traditional” (at that time largely and widely held and accepted) views regarding the male/female role divisions in marriage. He expected his wives to be beautiful, domesticated and tolerant of his heavy work schedule.

Berne married three times in all. First he married Ruth McRae. When Berne was first introduced to Ruth, in 1941, she was still married to her first husband Ian. Berne seemed smitten from the start, apparently saying Ruth was the epitome of his childhood dream of beauty



(Jorgensen & Jorgensen, 1984). Berne and Ruth began an affair, which resulted in Ruth becoming pregnant. Berne persuaded her to leave Ian and to marry him in 1942. Ruth reported being both attracted to and repulsed by Berne (Jorgensen & Jorgensen, 1984). They had two children Ellen, born in 1942, and Peter, born in 1945. By the time Peter was born, Berne and Ruth were already separated. They were divorced in 1946.

“As to the Freudian... elements in transactional theory, I think... Freud... [was] right, and I think I am right too, so I am not ready to discard any of us. Therefore, there has to be a way to get us together, which may take another ten years to do more elegantly than I have done it so far. (Berne, 1969, p.478)

Next, Berne met and married a divorced socialite, Dorothy De Mass Way, in 1947. They married in 1949 and divorced in 1964. Dorothy had three children from her first marriage: Robin, Janice, and Roxana (who was tragically killed in a car accident when she was aged fifteen). Dorothy and Berne had two children together: Eric Junior (Ricky) in 1952 and Terence (Terry) in 1955. In the school holidays, Ellen and Peter would

often come to stay with their father. At these times there would be seven children in the Berne household!

Finally in 1967, Berne married Torre Rosenkrantz, who was only 29 years old when she met Berne in approximately 1966 (Berne was then 56). They were married for only a short time, separated at the end of 1969 and were divorced in early 1970.

Berne's long-term relationship with Dorothy and his shorter relationship with Torre were both adversely affected by his gruelling work schedule.

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#### Relationship with psychoanalysis

In 1941, Berne began training as a psychoanalyst at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute and became an analysand of Paul Federn. Berne's analysis with Federn appears to have been cut short when he joined the United States army. After the war, he resumed his psychoanalytic training in San Francisco where he became the analysand of Erik Erikson from 1947-49. In 1956, after 15 years of psychoanalytic training, Berne was refused admission to the San Francisco Psychoanalytic Institute as a fully-fledged psychoanalyst. He was apparently asked to do a few years further training. It is likely that Berne's admission was refused at this time as his thinking, on both the ego and on intuition (see Berne, 1977), was not in keeping with the Freudian “party line”. Berne decided to end his psychoanalytic training at this time.

Berne continued to use Freudian concepts when he had no developed theory of his own in a particular area, and he compared and contrasted Freudian concepts with the concepts he himself was developing. Until the end of his life, Berne continued to use the Freudian methodology of the couch and free association in his individual psychotherapy work (Steiner, 1974), although with an increased emphasis on script analysis, rather than on psychoanalysis, as the years progressed. His group work was very different and concentrated on the theory and methodology of transactional analysis. A reply to a critique of transactional analysis in 1969, succinctly sums up Berne's attitude towards Freudian theory: “As to the Freudian... elements in transactional theory, I think... Freud... [was] right, and I think I am right too, so I am not ready to discard any of us. Therefore, there has to be a way to get us together, which may take another ten years to do more elegantly than I have done it so far.”

(Berne, 1969, p.478)

### Development of Transactional Analysis

Berne was developing, and using in his clinical work, the concept of ego states from around the early 1950s. In 1957, Berne had two articles published where he wrote for the first time about ego states. In the first article, entitled *The ego image*, Berne (1957a) differentiated between the Adult and Child states of the ego, and in the second article *Ego state in psychotherapy* he described the Parent ego state (1957b). Berne made clear that his development of ego state theory rested firmly on the foundations already laid by Federn (1952, published posthumously) and Weiss (1950). He concluded that what he was doing that was new was “not necessarily the concepts, but the emphasis and development.” (Berne, 1957b, p. 300) By the time Berne’s (1961) book *TA in psychotherapy* was published the main theories of TA had been conceived and written about, although they were all at different stages of development. These were: ego state theory; transactional analysis proper (the analysis of transactions); game and script theory.

In 1964, *Games People Play* was published, which led to the popularisation of transactional analysis around the world. At one point, Berne was apparently delighted to hear that this book had outsold *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (Lawrence, 1928) in England! (Jorgensen & Jorgensen, 1984)

Berne also wrote two books on groups and organizations entitled *The structure and dynamics of organizations and groups* (1963) and *Principles of group treatment* (1966).

Berne’s books *Sex in human loving* (1970) and *What do you say after you say hello?* (1972) were published posthumously.

### Work and writing schedule



Berne had an incredibly busy work schedule. For example, Cheney (1971) wrote:

“Monday mornings he saw patients in his Carmel Office, Monday afternoon he travelled to San Francisco. Tuesday morning he spent at one of the hospitals there. Tuesday afternoon he saw private patients; and beginning in 1950-51 he spent Tuesday

evening conducting his seminar. Wednesday he was back in the hospital, or... lecturing at... University of California School of Medicine. Wednesday afternoon patients. Wednesday evening teaching the TA 101 course, Thursday morning at Stanford or working with private patients, travelled back to Carmel Thursday afternoon. Thursday evening he conducted the Monterey TA Seminar. Friday he wrote, Friday evening, beginning in 1951, poker at his house, every week without fail. Week-ends were devoted to writing.” (p.17-18)

In all he wrote eight psychotherapy-related books during his lifetime and over 56 articles and book chapters (ten of these were co-authored). He was also editor of the *Transactional Analysis Bulletin* from 1962 to 1969, and consulting editor in 1970.

Berne also travelled widely, eg Fiji, India, Lebanon, Singapore, Syria and Turkey, primarily to research the psychiatric institutes, hospitals and practices in these countries.

### Berne’s personality

Berne was an astute observer and studier of human beings and their behaviour. This aspect of his personality clearly developed early, for example, Berne’s sister (Grace) recalled that as a student Berne would spend hours at the Montreal docks observing the alcoholics. (Jorgensen & Jorgensen, 1978)

Berne has been described variously as: “playful, scientific, intense” (Dusay, 1971, p.43); “devilish, witty, naughty”, “very shy” and “of genius capacities” (Steiner, 1971, p.46); “a constant source of encouragement, enthusiasm, and support” (Harris, 1971, p.59); “a man of many moods” (p.64) and “direct and straight” (p.69) (Levaggi et al, 1971, p.64). People often had strong reactions in response to Berne, they tended to either love him or hate him.

He had “irrepressible humour” (Steiner, 1971) which was particularly evident in his writing, for example in his article entitled “Who was condom?” (Bernstein, 1940) Berne wrote about the contraceptive, the condom, and whether a man called Condom ever existed!

He was confrontational and provocative, particularly regarding the psychiatric profession and practices of the time. For example, in his last keynote address given in June 1970 at the Golden Gate Group Psychotherapy Society (Berne, 1971), with the spoof title “Away from a theory of the impact of interpersonal interaction on non-verbal participation”, Berne was critical of the antipathy of the psychiatric profession’s attitude towards curing their patients.

Berne worked hard and played hard. He enjoyed “jumping up and down” (Steiner, 1971, p.47) parties after the weekly seminars in San Francisco, playing poker on Friday evenings with his Carmel friends, and

swimming and constitutionals on his favourite Carmel beach on Sundays with his friends and children.

### Final days

Berne experienced a first heart attack on 28 June 1970. He was hospitalised and was expected to make a near full recovery. He even spent time correcting the proofs for one of his books. Just over two weeks later on 15 July 1970, he had a second heart attack and died. Eric Berne was only sixty when he died. I often wonder how he and transactional analysis would have continued to have developed if he had lived to a ripe old age.

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\*This paper has also been submitted as Ann's conference paper for the ITAA Montreal Conference planned for August 2010, where she is co-running a workshop with Marco Mazzetti. The content of this short biographical sketch of Eric Berne is representative of the current state of Ann's knowledge and understanding of Berne and his life – she would like the reader to be aware, that what she has written is work in progress and has yet to be fully verified.



Ann Heathcote, BSc(Hons)Psych, is a Certified Transactional Analyst (Psychotherapy), who lives and works in the UK. She is currently engaged in researching 'The life and work of Eric Berne', with a view to writing an up-to-date biography of his life and theoretical development.