Socio-Psychological Alienation in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown"

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Abstract

This paper investigates socio-psychological alienation in Hawthorne's story "Young Goodman Brown". It focuses on Brown's psychological motivations that lead him to leave his village, Salem, on a journey to be taken literally and allegorically along with the inner conflicts thereof. Eventually, the result is a short-lived schism in his psyche. In fact, what urges Brown to step farther into the dark wood is an insistence to discover the whole truth so as to put an end to any vacillation between threatening possibilities suggested by the devil about the Puritan society to which he belongs. Thus, Brown turns into a rejectionist of all the teachings of his Puritan culture. In the end not only does he liberate himself from these cultural shackles, but he also seems to rise above them. So, while he lives among his countrymen he is not one of them. Brown's new psychological state never allows him to accept the evil nature and the hypocrisy of his ancestry. Moreover, the psychological confusion in Brown's psyche reaches its peak in a state of depression that we notice at the end of the story, which eventually puts him among those who have come to be called the "dark" romantics of the period, along with Poe, Melville, and Dickinson.

Keywords: Alienation, Freudian psychology, isolation, puritan society, psychological gap, self-estrangement.

1. Introduction

The theme of alienation is widespread and has been tackled in several fields, like sociology and psychology. People can be alienated from others, from society and culture, and, more importantly, from themselves. It was introduced into social science generally via Marx (Israel, 1971). Writers like Marx, Rousseau and Hegel tackled the theme of alienation in their works. And today, the subject of alienation is introduced into the works of contemporary philosophers such as Sartre, Marcuse, and Schacht, as well as many others. In literature, Camus and Kafka have contributed a lot to the theme, and in drama, alienation and self-estrangement were common themes in the works of Ibsen and Ionesco.

In an attempt to define 'alienation', Feuer write explains that Alienation lies in every direction of human experience where basic emotional desire is frustrated, every direction in which the person may be compelled by social situations to do violence to his nature. "'Alienation' is used to convey the emotional tone that accompanies any behavior in which the person is compelled to act self-destructively; that is the most general definition of alienation, and its dimensions will be as varied as human desire and need" (Feuer, 1969).

Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" has been of great interest to many critics; there are several studies that try to investigate Brown's gloomy journey. For example, one of the main themes in Hawthorne's story, as described by Norman Hostetler, "concerns conscious awareness of the reality which the mind imposes on external objects. Hawthorne's characters are frequently challenged by the need to establish the relationship between their imagination and the external world." (Hostler, 1982). In his dissertation entitled "Hawthorne's Conception of History: a Study of the Author's Response to Alienation From God and Man", Lloyd Moore Daigrepont depicts the loss of faith in Brown's personality and his alienation from God saying that the inadequacies of the Puritan system lead to his desperate attempt to maintain his own sainthood through the condemnation of others through a psychological projection of his own evil tendencies. Brown's final despair is caused not merely by his isolation but also by a subsequent loss of faith as well. (Daigrepont, 1979)

Amidst such a wide range of studies and opinions, the current study investigates alienation   in "Young

Goodman Brown" from a socio-psychological angle as a mental process involving the creation of a gap between an unpleasant or threatening reality and the mind, making use of Freudian psychology, among others, with a glance at the biographical/historical dimension. The resulting effect of all this in is not only a dejected person but a completely new one.

2. Psychological Alienation and Brown's Confusion

Freud's studies of ancient tribal totem and taboo illustrate his interest in religion and culture. Here he is in line with other studies in the field. For instance, in her book *God, Freud and Religion* states Dianna Kenney "argues that our worldview is circumscribed by the language we use to describe our experiences. We are all embedded in a historically conditioned set of prejudices enshrined in culture and language." (Kenny, 2015) In a similar vein Freud argues that Whoever be the individuals who compose it, however like or unlike be their mode of life, their occupations, "their character, or their intelligence, the fact that they have been transformed into a group puts them in possession of a sort of collective mind which makes them feel, think, and act in a manner quite different from that in which each individual of them would feel, think, and act were he in a state of isolation" (Kenny , 2015).

Psychological 'alienation' is defined in terms of thoughts and feelings. By minimizing associative connections with other thoughts, the threatening cognition is remembered less often and is less likely to affect self-esteem (Baumeister et al., 1998). Sigmund Freud illustrates the concept with the example of a person beginning a train of thought and then pausing for a moment before continuing to a different subject. His theory states that by inserting an interval the person is "letting it be understood symbolically that he will not allow his thoughts about that impression or activity to come into associative contact with other thoughts" (Freud, 1961).

Thus, by investigating Brown's apparently obscure journey into the dark woods, the study shows that this journey leads towards psychological isolation, as he, consciously or not, creates an impenetrable wall between him and the Puritan society he lives in. Throughout the story, he behaves such that he is led to experience a kind of a gap between the threatening misgivings he has towards the Puritan society and other thoughts and feelings, and that is why he ends up as a psychologically isolated figure, though with a completely new identity.

Brown's collective mind lies on a shaken basis derived from his home town, Salem village, which was at that time the main center of Puritan ideology and has become infamous for its witch hunt. The reader is never told overtly about the reasons that lead Brown to leave his home and his wife, Faith, who appeals to him to put off his journey, "prithee put off your journey until sunrise and sleep in your bed to-night," adding with what amounts to a warning, "A lone woman is troubled with such dreams and such thoughts that she is feared of herself sometimes." She perseveres, Pray tarry with me this night, dear husband, of all nights in the year" (McQuade, 1999) All we know now is that the journey taken at this time and date is urgent and desperate; it cannot be delayed or postponed. Another significant detail in the opening part of the story is Faith's reference to bed, which undoubtedly has sexual overtones. Without openly justifying his decision to leave Salem village and his wife, he replies, "My love and my Faith, of all nights in the year, this one night must I tarry away from thee" (McQuade, 1999). In all this, the reader feels that he is before a troubled marriage in its third month, that there is something vague, even ominous, going on between husband and wife, a fact which seems to undermine the glorious image of family in puritan ideology. Brown's insistence to begin his journey at sunset gives the reader a clue that the journey is not going to be propitious at all, and, when this is coupled with the forest into which he is planning to venture, the blazes, the hideously shadowy figures and the horrid voices the Gothic element of the story is fully outlined.

Freud is not too far from all this, since Brown is setting himself free from his social obligations in marriage as a social institution imposed by society on its members in what is regarded as a general agreement between the individual and his community as outlined in *Civilization and its Discontents*. What makes itself felt in a human community as "a desire for freedom may be their revolt against some existing injustice, and so may prove favourable to a further development of civilization; it may remain compatible with civilization. But it may also spring from the remains of their original personality, which is still untamed by civilization and may thus become the basis in them of hostility to civilization (Feud, 1930).

Brown, thus, flouts marriage in spite of his wife's appeals and seeks a sort of refuge in the diametrically opposite religious power, the Devil. Faith with her sexual frustration and her pink ribbon blowing in the air, has a good reason to seek the same refuge. So, while she is sexually frustrated, he is socially delinquent. Moreover, Freud, in his book *A general Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, speaks of one case of neurosis where the patient has "anomalous libido development" (Freud, 1958), a somewhat relevant case to our study. With all this taken into consideration, the Gothic forest adds emphasis to the dark and mysterious conflict which exists in the

protagonist's psyche.

Now his experience in the forest, taken literally or allegorically is one of initiation, conversion, and confirmation, all at once. It officially initiates him into a new/old community, converts him to rival religion, and confirms what his Puritan culture has inculcated into his psyche about the original sin, predestination and the doctrine of the Elect. The first tenet subsumes his own ancestors. Here Brown reflects his literary creator, who was so troubled by his knowledge of his ancestors having been directly involved in witch hunt and the horrible persecutions associated with it, that he wanted to disown the connection by adding a "w" to his original family name "Hathorne."

And in the wood, Brown's complacency is shattered. The Devil claims that "They (his family) were my good friends, both; and many a pleasant walk have we along this path, and returned merrily after midnight" (McQuade, 1999). Brown cannot but deny the claims forcefully "My father never went into the woods on such an errand, nor his father before him. We have a race of honest men and good Christians since the days of the martyrs; and shall I be the first of the name Brown that ever took this path." The Devil strikes again "I have been as well acquainted with you family …They were my good friends, both; and many a pleasant walk have we had along this path" (McQuade, 1999).

Against such devilish accusations the ego resorts to denial, one defense mechanism at its disposal, "I marvel they never spoke of these matters…We are a people of prayer, and good works to boot, and abide no such wickedness." (McQuade, 1999) But denial cannot live forever. Brown has to face reality. For example, he cannot deny that he has just left his wife, and remorse strikes home, "What a wretch am I to leave her on such an errand." (McQuade, 1999) Now the name Goodman begins to have some ironic undertones since a "good man" in Hawthorne's day was a person of proper ancestry. But Hawthorne uses this very tradition to glance at Brown in his conference with the Devil. Brown claims that he is from a family of upright and moral men that would never go into the forest on a trip such as the one he ironically is currently taking.

Along with the discovery of the truth about his ancestors, comes a similar discovery about the community, when Brown ventures out into the forest for his encounter with the devil, he finds out, in a kind of dramatic anagnorisis, that in the dark of the night, many of the well- thought of, respectable members of his community and closest friends and even ancestors have already discovered this temptation and lost or given in to the devil. One such person, among others, is Goody Cloyse, the "old woman that taught me my catechism." (McQuade, 1999). All that he has considered moral and "good" in his life, he finds in the throes of sin, which torments his mind and, in turn, destroys his perception of practically everything in his life and consequently his emotional and mental security. So, he is alienated not only from himself and his family, but also from his community, the people he is in daily touch with.

Brown, thus, emerges as a man who has had the terrible experience of discovering in a kind of dramatic anagnorisis, the truth about his family, his community, and the heart of man, where the fiend rages uninterruptedly. The confirmation he desperately and ironically seeks from the Devil comes at a time when he is suffering from sexual anomaly, social delinquency, and a troubled relation with his wife, Faith, taken literally and allegorically. He, that is his ego which is according to Freud governed by the Reality Principle, is tossed into a world of doubt which he cannot control, nor can he resolve its multiple conflicts. As his journey continues, the psychological gap starts to emerge in his psyche; he is unable to believe the unpleasant and the threatening thoughts that he hears from the old traveler about his father and his ancestors.

Brown's ego here is overburdened by the turbulent realities around, as it is by a "consideration of the tensions produced by stimuli present within it or introduced into it" (Freud, 1949). And the raising of these tensions is felt as 'unpleasure and their lowering as pleasure.' As he steps further, danger increases, and the 'ego' "gives up its connection with the external world and withdraws into a state of sleep." (Freud, 1949) However, he rejects the belief that his ancestors were the devil's close friends; he tries to isolate these threatening suspicions about the puritans in his psyche. Rejection, that is denial, as his only defense, turns into his most effective defense mechanism to the very end. Still, he continues to walk, motivated by his id' allied with the Devil, its external double, as both threaten and are threatened by social restrictions.

And, maddened with despair, as he laughed loud and long and "The road grew wilder and drearier and more faintly traced, and vanished at length, leaving him in the heart of the dark wilderness, still rushing onward with the instinct that guides mortal man to evil (McQuade, 1999) As Steven Olson states, "In effect, in this complex and conflicting psychological state Brown must isolate himself from his community and hide himself from himself. (Olson, 2009) Brown, in Durkheim's point of view, is somewhat an anomie, "an outcome of particular social forces and dissatisfactions that lead to disobedience and rebellion" (Kenny, 2015).

The gloomy journey or the night journey reflects the excruciating nature of Brown's experience and his descent into his unconscious, which is according to Jung, "the situation of the primitive hero who is devoured by the dragon." From Jung's point view, those who undergo such terrible experiences are "overpowered by the unconsciousness and helplessly abandoned which means that they have volunteered to die in order to beget a new and fruitful life in that region of the psyche which has hitherto lain fallow in the darkest unconscious" (Jung, 1912).

Social alienation is a corollary of psychological alienation. Goodman Brown's journey into the dark wood is a kind of general, unstated story, representing man's irrational force to leave behind faith, home, and security temporarily and take a chance with one trip into the woods of temptation. Young Goodman Brown's curiosity to find out what lies in the depths of the forest cripples his ability to have a naive outlook on life and, consequently, on the way to live until his death. However, here Brown seems to be heading for what amounts to a mission in the forest to see if the teachings of his childhood, his religion, and his culture, have given him enough will power to resist the temptation of the Devil. The symbol of the forest, late at night, can be interpreted as the untamed regions of his heart, where the devil roams freely as he roams in the forest, the devil's territory.

3. Conclusion

The influence of one's social background is of great significance in relation to Brown's reaction and behavior. In the story, Hawthorne uses this concept of being from a good background and still going astray to criticize the way in which society at the times put so much emphasis on a person's background to determine that person's significance in society. With this, Hawthorne desecrates the tradition that a person's background predetermines his present status, and of his society's view of honor by depicting the horrible reality of his family's past. However, the Devil points to the painful truth of the past and the reality of the way in which people act in the present. Consequently, Brown's social background and its shameful reality are the main reason that leads to the psychological and social alienation that he experiences throughout the story.

Part of Brown's isolation is shown in his self-denial. Not only does he reject the belief in the unpleasant thoughts about the puritans, but he also denies his traditional evil and destructive self; he seems to deny his own identity as he steps further and hides himself in order not to be seen by his teacher of catechism and the minister in the forest. Furthermore, Brown is unable to adapt; he rejects his heritage, and is therefore rebellious, he has become an outcast, alienated from his culture and its beliefs. And the psychological split created in his psyche reaches its peak when he becomes hostile to the puritan heritage. In this regard, his refusal to adapt is not a failure, but an honest and dignified posture, for, while he sheds his cultural heritage, he is dignified with the honor of truth to oneself.

Like the wedding guest in Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient mariner', after hearing a story of undiluted evil, the newly-married Brown, wakes up the next day, " a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man did he become from the night of that dreadful dream." (McQuade, 1999) He cannot listen to the holy psalm on Sabbath Day, because an anthem of sin overrides it. He is afraid that the roof might collapse over the head of the minister with his thundering sermon about saints and triumphant deaths. All this is what he goes through among the congregation because sin and nothing but sin shoots through it all, turning it into a lie and even travesty. All this is somehow reminiscent though in a different context, of Byron's lines, "I stood/Among them but not of them—in a shroud/Of thoughts which were not their thoughts." (Abrams, 2000) Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," Melville's *Moby Dick,* and Hawthorne's "The Birth Mark" all have the same overtones. Something is or has gone wrong about man's existence on earth. In England Shelley hopes desperately "If winter comes spring, can spring be far behind" (Abrams, 2000). Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" speaks about pure evil, cold-blooded unprovoked evil (Abrams, 2000). Some of Keats' odes have the same melancholy strain. Even Wordsworth, the happiest of all Romantics, cannot but lament sorrowfully "what man has made of man" (Abrams, 2000). Thus, Brown belongs to this company of dark Romantics. He claims affinity with all of these partly at least, a dark romantic dreaming of a sinless, guiltless, and guileless self rather than a hypocrite but socially adapted member of society.

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