

Original Paper

A Psychoanalytical Approach to Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Ethan Brand"

Yuqing Sun^{1*} & Shuo Zhao¹

¹ School of Foreign Studies, Northwestern Polytechnical University, Xi'an, China

* Yuqing Sun, School of Foreign Studies, Northwestern Polytechnical University, Xi'an, China

Received: July 4, 2018

Accepted: July 16, 2018

Online Published: July 25, 2018

doi:10.22158/jecs.v2n3p154

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/jecs.v2n3p154>

Abstract

Psychoanalytical criticism to literary works is one of the important ways to uncover the depths of author's thinking, which also contributes to readers' understanding of actions, characteristics, plots or even endings of characters in the novel. From the perspective of psychoanalysis, this article focuses on Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Ethan Brand" written by him in 1850 to analyze Hawthorne's unconscious intention of creating this story and the reasons of why he writes in that way instead of another.

Keywords

Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ethan Brand, Psychoanalytical criticism, Sigmund Freud

1. Introduction

Irrefutably, the foremost pioneer of psychoanalysis is the Vienna neurologist and psychologist Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) who lays the foundation for the approaches to the psychoanalytical criticism about literature. It is him that argues the latent part of our mind controlling ostensible actions and behavior, the unconscious. The best way to investigate a literary work is to focus on the workings of the unconscious in author's mind to uncover the hidden desires, erotic wishes, and many forbidden motivations which can be easily released in disguised content that we really appreciate ostensibly.

Dealing with the psychological disorders and abnormalities, Freud would like to pay attention to the childhood experiences. when we utilize the same methods in the interpretation of literary works, we actually engage in the process of psychoanalytical criticism. As for the classification of the human psyche, Freud has proposed the famous and widely known revised typographical model, "the tripartite model" (Bressler 122). This model classified the human psyche into three parts including the id, the ego, the superego (Freud, 78). The id is the most imperceptible part that can be easily ignored by us.

Also the id contains numerable unchecked and unacceptable thinking like secret wishes, heinous desires. The ultimate intention of this part is to satisfy all of its instinctual feelings, usually include the sensible libido, for its own pleasure sake only. The ego part is more reasonable than the earlier part, the id part, it must follow the real regulations to guide the unconscious to extricate or liberate in an innocuous way, but the activities involved in this state is still unconscious. The last part is named as the superego, a further censor of those restless workings under the id part. It operate on the basis of the social and moral canons to defend the society against any slander. Namely, the superego may serve as a guard agent to thrust those wicked back to the unconscious. So, the ego plays as an mediating role to appease the intensity between the id and the super ego for the id wants to get rid of the repression to the conscious, while the superego is obliged to impede the entering of the unconscious.

With regard to the interpretation of literary works, he asserts that all artists, including authors suffered neurotic problems, and their paramount aim of writing is to gratify oppressive affections. The content we read about is the external expression of the unconscious, but the indwelling fact is the true meaning that the author really intends to say. The literary work itself is the outward manifestation on the surface, more like the dreams and fantasies of the author, the ultimate goal of literary exploration is to reveal the inward thinking.

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864), the celebrated American writer, devoted himself to the domain of dark romantic and short story genre. Bleak vision, atonement, puritan norms, evil of humanity, psychological complexity are predominantly inescapable tag content of his theme. Looking back on his life experiences, the notorious affairs with the Salem witch trials of his forebears, the infamous for their harsh sentencing of the innocent people, have exerted so ponderous influences upon him that he probably added the “w” to his surname in his early twenties, shortly after graduating from college, in an effort to dissociate himself from his malicious ancestors. Under the roof of puritan family with severe criterion, he was unavoidably born with the burden, the puritan birthmark in his early childhood. The core of puritanism are doctrines of predestination, original sin, total depravity, limited atonement through a special infusion of grace form God, and the “unpardonable sin” upon which Hawthorne has probed into thoroughly in composing his works. In light of his main dwelling in the New England, he centers on the instinctive depictions that are related in this place.

2. Ethan Brand

“Ethan Brand—A Chapter from an Abortive Romance” (originally, “The Unpardonable Sin”) is a short story written by Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1850 and first published in *The Snow-Image, and Other Twice-Told Tales*, the author’s final collection of short stories. The author was inspired to compose this short story due to his sudden encounter of the burning lime kiln while climbing Mount Greylock at midnight several times in the summer of 1838. He didn’t write the story soon until in the winter of 1848-1949, the period when he suffered awfully the death of his mother. Later on, in the late July, he called this phase as, “the darkest hour I ever lived” (net 1).

Hawthorne describes the weird acquaintances of some villagers with Ethan Brand and their debates about “unpardonable sin”. With the roar of laughter, the little son Joe recognized it as an awfully portentous sound, while the obtuse father, lime-burner Bartram, esteemed it awfully as drunken man’s laughter. However, due to the approaching of the devilish figure, the clown father identified the coarse man finally. He was the man of great hero and of marvelous legend, the man who searched for his “unpardonable sin” many years ago, the man they have once believed as elapsed. Now, he came back appallingly like a wayfarer. These two men cast into the discussion on “where might the ‘unpardonable sin’ be?” The little Joe darted away on his errand to inform other jolly fellows in the village. Then, the whole lazy regiment came, the wilted and smoke-dried stage-agent, the soap-vat attorney, the brutal doctor, all have enjoyed the reverence in the past and experienced the hollow condition in the reality. They all greeted Ethan Brand and averred that they could find something far better worth seeking for the “unpardonable sin”. Also, there was a while-haired father, looking for his gorgeous daughter. But the old German Jew did throw himself in these greetings with his diorama and invite many people to look through the pictures in the box. What’s more, the elderly, venerable and mild dog with him began to turn round after his tail, faster and faster with fiercer yells of animosity. At the end of their meetings, all the fellows hurried homewards, including Bartram and his son, leaving Ethan Brand alone in a solitude fire and he commits suicide by climbing into the furnace. Awakened by the peal of the laughter in their dream at that night, they father and son got up with the hovering of the cloud, the pouring of sunshine, and the rattling of the son. They ran up to the top of the Kiln, saw some kind of human skeleton lied down to long repose, the remorseless lime-burner Bartram crumbled the these relics of Ethan Brand into pieces and fragments.

3. Psychoanalytical Reasons of Writing

In accordance with the standpoint of Freud, there must be some latent meaning inside the author’s heart for the story is the outward representation in nature. What the psychoanalytic critics can do first is to construct the author’s personality with its eternal conflicts to illuminate the individual work (Freud, 60). What is the inner meaning that Hawthorne really wants to convey? So, if we intend to answer the question, we ought to grasp author’s biographical background as we have mentioned before. There are several vital points we should pay close attention to, the death of his mother, the puritan bondage, and the romantic impact upon him.

3.1 Puritanism

Firstly, puritanism is the profound core of American literature, in the 16th and 17th centuries, a group of English Reformed Protestants came to the new place to purify their the Church of England from its “Catholic” practices, and to pursue their religious freedom. The Puritan migration to New England was marked in its effects in the two decades from 1620s to 1640s. So, New England is almost the original birthplace for the puritanism. Undoubtedly, Hawthorne may become the spokesman to song its voice. We human beings, expelled by God as the symbol of Adam and Eve, have the Original Sin, that is the

insatiable desire for more. Ethan Brand, “the hero of many a legend familiar to their childhood” possesses the lurid “unpardonable sin”. “A sin that grew nowhere else! The sin of an intellect that triumphed over the sense of brotherhood with man and reverence for God” (Bressler 220). In the pursuit of an intellectual man, he let his portentous desire aghast like the riotous blaze and the ruddy heat in the furnace. The daughter of the white-haired father, “the Esther of our tale, the very girl whom, with such cold and remorseless purpose, Ethan Brand had made the subject of a psychological experiment, and wasted, absorbed, and perhaps annihilated her soul, in the process” (Bressler 222). “He has lost his hold of the magnetic chain of humanity. He was no longer a brother-man” (Bressler 226). For the sake of his own selfish goal, he even talked with devilish Stan, and regarded human as his subject and the puppets of experiment.

On account of the demand of his study or the thirst for knowledge, he violated human nature and became a cold monster. In search for the “unpardonable sin”, he began to realize his fiend nature with sin in his heart and seek to find his retribution by bending forward his body into the fire and plunging into the inferno of intensest torment. At last, “it seemed almost as if a mortal man might thus ascend into the heavenly regions”, “‘the Old Graylock’ was gloried with a golden cloud upon his head” (Bressler 227), the so called “unpardonable sin” was eventually redeemed by the God. Whereas, from the puritan’s point of view, the sinned people can hardly get their salvation, the author calling it as “unpardonable sin”, but still Ethan Brand received his retribution, these may also attest his contradictory personality about puritanism dogma.

3.2 Romanticism

In order to know what the author really wants to confide, the era romanticism cannot be overlooked. Romanticism was an intellectual movement that originated in Europe toward the end of the 18th century and at its peak in the approximate period from 1800 to 1850 (Hirsch, 134). Romanticism was characterized itself by its emphasis on individual feelings as a reaction to the Industrial Revolution (Cornwell, 41). Romanticists were distrustful of the human world. They want to escape the tremulous reality of the world. To express these emotions, they would imagine the content of the art like a personal dream to hold their own spiritual world with as little interference as possible from “artificial” rules that dictated what a work should consist of.

Especially, they would like to anthropomorphize evil in the form of Satan, devils, and ghosts, that are emblematic of human nature as Ethan Brand in his short story. When this dismal illusory figure, the “unpardonable sin” itself in the heart of every human being tries to talk about the those villagers for “he has found what he sought, and therefore he comes back again” and “laid his finger on his own heart” (Bressler 218), they only realized him as a “madman” and acclimated that they “would find something far better worth seeking for than the ‘unpardonable sin’” (Bressler 222). The ubiquitous “stage-agent”, the “Lawyer Giles”, the “village daughter”, all of them were intellectuals once, now they are mainly terrible devilish figures who bear the true human nature. Even though Ethan Brand “groped into their heart” (Bressler 222), he said that he “found nothing there for his purpose” (Bressler 222), they did not

acknowledge their sin. In the end, “the rude lime-burner Bartram lifted his pole, letting it fall upon the skeleton, the relics of Ethan Brand were crumbled into fragments” (Bressler 228). What concerns him most is the value of Ethan Brand heart as whether it has burn into good lime. That was a big joke.

Hawthorne accomplished his short story in this ironic way to indicate his secret desires and forbidden thoughts. Owing to the dehumanization of the Industrial Revolution, the people were ruined and many romanticists provoked to change the society but supernatural realm was actually as a haunting reminders of the impossibility of radical change since the darkness of human nature for pursuing more. That is the author’s despair. In another way, the lime-burner maybe Hawthorne himself, he was also the one that bear creepy motivations, desires and “unpardonable sin” (Ethan Brand) in his deep mind regardless the sense of brother hood because he himself left his family with his mother and two sisters at a very young age to pursue intellectual profit, the author resemble themselves as the “self-pursuing cur” that “round around after his own tail” (Bressler 224) “faster and faster” “the louder and fiercer grew his yells of rage and animosity as far from the goal as ever” “in pursuit of an object that could not possibly be attained” (Bressler 224).

3.3 *The Death of His Mother*

Oppressed by the stereotypically naturalization of the bourgeoisie creed for more fortune and the puritanism dogma, the id, the unconscious firstly censored by the ego, travels to the conscious (the superego) manifestation in a much modeled way and disguised form, the unpardonable sin was pardonable in mind, the disdainful human nature was self-internalized in fact. Further, the grievous demise of his loving mother affected him vehemently (Ginsberg, 35). The year after his mother’s death, he composed this story. Throughout his biography, we could probably draw a conclusion that he had a badly restricted time to get along with his mother, even though he father was died when he was at the age of four. He spent so much time in his study and career in the his relatives’ family that he developed rampant guilt in his psyche which can account for his sorrowful homesickness at that time and his confession tone on writing the story. When he plunged himself into the furnace, he uttered “O Mother Earth”, “who art no more my Mother, and into whose bosom this frame shall never be resolved!—come deadly element of fire, henceforth my familiar friend! Embrace me, as I do thee!” (Bressler 226). He bent forward into the furnace with the bosom of the fire, which may symbolize his mother. The furnace “like an oven-mouth, but large enough to admit a man in a stooping posture” (Bressler 216).

On the basis of Freud’s psychoanalytical techniques, “everything in a text more frequently than not becomes a sexual image, every concave image is a yonic symbol (female), and many image whose length exceeds its diameter becomes phallic symbol (male)” (Bressler 134). Thus, he himself (the phallic symbol) with the conduct of his entering into the furnace (the yonic symbol) may symbolize his secret desire to connect with his mother which he think that “will never be resolved”. He stealthily desires to the sexual union with his mother. This libido or the erotic attachment to his mother, named “the Oedipus Complex” by Freud, may be buried since his infantile period, but it cannot be fully appeased because of his early separation with mother and the single parentage which may accelerate

his passionate desire. While under the dogmatic moral and societal code, the author have no choose but hide his unintelligible desire (the id) behind his confession with the unpardonable sin (the superego) (Hall, 94).

4. Conclusion

Above all, with the method of psychoanalytical techniques, the intended or somewhat bold desires of the author inside the literary work can be brought out to reveal the connections between the operation of mind and the model of shaping the imaged world as Hawthorne once said “these things hide the man instead of displaying him” (net 2).

Acknowledgement

This article receives the Fundamental Research Fund for the Central Universities of China (3102017jc19006), thank you so much for this support. In addition, I want to give thanks, in particular, to my supervisor Prof. Shuo Zhao for his patience, support and sincere cultivation for my academic ability over the past years.

References

- Bressler, Charles E. (2003). *Literary Criticism: An Introduction To Theory and Practice* (pp. 134-228). New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Cornwell, N. (1990). *The Literary Fantastic: From Gothic to Postmodernism* (pp. 41-44). New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Freud, A. (1964). *The Ego and the Mechanism of Defense* (pp. 78-90). New York: International University Press.
- Freud, S. (1959). *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (pp. 60-63). New York: Bantam Books.
- Ginsberg, L. (2012). Hawthorne's Transatlantic Gothic House of Fiction: The House of the Seven Gables. *Nathaniel Hawthorne Review*, 2012(2), 35-60.
- Hall, C. (1964). *A Primer of Freudian Psychology* (pp. 94-121). New York: Mentor/New American Literary.
- Hirsch, D. (1971). *H. Reality and Idea in the Early American Novel* (pp. 134-155). The Hague: Mouton.
- Wikipedia. (2016, October 9). Nathaniel Hawthorne. *The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved October 15, 2016, from https://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nathaniel_Hawthorne
- Wikipedia. (2016, September 20). The Snow-Image, and Other Twice-Told Tales. *The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved October 15, 2016, from https://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nathaniel_Hawthorne