

Original Paper

The Tragedy of McTeague: The Destruction of the Subject

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Abstract

*Frank Norris is a well-known American writer with a reputation as a naturalist writer. *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco* is his masterpiece and a representative work of American naturalistic literature. Based on a news report, the novel focuses on the tragic fate of a dentist named McTeague who murders his stingy wife, Trina Sipe. In this paper, two concepts of “the mirror stage” and “symbol” in French philosopher Jacques Lacan’s subjective theory will be used to interpret the protagonist McTeague’s tragic fate. “The Mirror stage” refers to the fact that people always build a “pseudo-self” through the images of others while Lacan’s concept of symbol points out the emptiness and meaninglessness of signifiers and signs that will control human beings. This paper will first use the idea of the mirror stage to analyze how different others affect the formation process of McTeague’s subjectivity, and then use Lacan’s conception of symbols to analyze how signs control McTeague’s behavior and lead him into madness. Lacanian interpretation of this novel can help readers to analyze McTeague’s loss of his subjectivity and trigger modern people’s thinking.*

Keywords

McTeague: A Story of San Francisco, subject theory, the mirror stage, symbol

1. Introduction

Frank Norris, a novelist and short-story writer, is the first important U.S. author to embrace the literary style known as naturalism. In 1899, he published his novel *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco* which established his reputation. It is a naturalist work set in San Francisco. The novel tells the story of a dentist, McTeague, who murders his miserly wife, Trina Sieppe, and then meets his end while fleeing through Death Valley. In addition to focusing on the theme of greed in this book, it is also meaningful to analyze the tragic subject of McTeague. Therefore, this paper will use the subject theory of Jacques Lacan, a famous French philosopher and psychoanalyst, to analyze how McTeague’s tragedy is reflected in this naturalistic novel and arouse modern people’s thinking on how to maintain subjective clarity and independence.

Jacques Lacan is arguably the most original and influential structuralist psychoanalysis since Freud. His ideas have revolutionized the clinical practice of psychoanalysis and continue to be a major influence in fields as diverse as film studies, literary criticism, feminist theory, and philosophy. Under the influence and base of people like Hegel and Freud, Lacan's work constitutes a rebuke to ego and a return to Freud's belief in the power of the unconscious in human life. Yet his work also rewrites Freud in important ways. He inserts the self into culture. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" was a paper delivered at the 16th International Congress of Psychoanalysis, Zürich, July 17, 1949. In this paper, the conception of the mirror stage has been called his most famous and significant contribution to psychoanalysis. Lacan defines the mirror stage as an identification, the transformation in the subject when he assumes an image (Lacan, p. 442). Primarily concerned with identity, subjectivity, and fantasy, Lacan claims the mirror stage takes place between the ages of six to eighteen months when an infant recognizes its self in connection with the image of the specular self in the mirror. The result is a fantasized, fictional self that is unified and made whole via the image in the mirror. The child identifies himself through an external image, and once he identifies with that image, he feels able to do things he could not do before. But in fact, this self is a kind of misrecognition. It is only an imaginary, illusory image in the mirror that gives him a sense of whole and unity. But this does not mean that can only infants remember the mirror stage, but it is a philosophical metaphor of Lacan that the establishment of the subject is through the other.

2. The False Self Defined by the Other

The mirror stage can be used to analyze McTeague's subject formation. In the novel, the appearance of several characters profoundly affects McTeague's fate, namely his father and Trina Sieppe. First of all, his father is the person who has the most far-reaching influence on McTeague. McTeague was born in a mining area. His father was a miner, and he became a car boy under his father's guidance. Therefore, in his first ten years of life, he was accompanied by the mining area, his father's alcoholism and violence, and in his initial mirror stage, he faced the lower class of the United States in the context of the gold rush in the 19th century. The novel tells very little about McTeague's past in the mining area, but from the symbols of concertina and canary that are repeated many times in the text, it can be seen that he identifies with the miner's identity represented by his father. The six lugubrious airs he played on the concertina always carried him back to the time when he was a car boy at the Big Dipper Mine in Placer County, ten years before (Norris 1). The concertina is a recurring symbol in the novel, a reminder of his life as a miner and a preserver of his identity. He cherished it and took solace from it that when Trina sold it, it angered McTeague and became the trigger for him to kill Trina. At the same time, the canary he cherished most is a relic of a past age. Once carried into the mines in wooden and metal cages to alert miners of carbon monoxide, canaries were, according to the Mine Safety and Health Administration, replaced by the monoxor CO indicator in the late nineteenth century (McGlynn, p. 27). The canary is a symbol of McTeague's old identity. At the same time, in the book, whether McTeague forcefully kissed Trina, beat

Marcus, or escaped, Norris repeatedly uses “the fist of old-time car boy”, “the hands of car boy”, “the instinct of old-time carboy” to describe McTeague, which not only proves that the miner’s identity has never disappeared from him, but also proves the source of the disturbing violent factors implied in him, that is, the miner’s life mirrored by his father, which is masculine and contains violent factors. This is McTeague’s initial subject formation.

The second person who directly influenced his fate is Trina Sieppe. Trina first appeared as a beautiful middle-class woman. She and McTeague were attracted to each other and entered into marriage, but Trina’s internal force of avarice became stronger and stronger, and eventually their marriage ended in tragedy. McTeague murdered Trina in the kindergarten. From the moment they met, their budding love was nothing more than a “pseudo-self” in the mirror. Lacan assumes that the mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality (Lacan, p. 444). This means that people with a sense of fragmentation are eager to find a sense of completeness in the mirror, so they are tempted by space and use the image in the mirror as a reference to fantasize and change their image. The novel begins by describing McTeague’s image as follows: His mind was as his body, heavy, slow to act, sluggish. Yet there was nothing vicious about the man. Altogether he suggested the draft horse, immensely strong, stupid, docile, obedient (Norris 1). At this time, he had left the mining area and lived in San Francisco as a dentist. The discovery of gold in California in 1849 attracted 89,000 gold seekers from around the world. San Francisco’s population grew from 459 in 1847 to 56,802 in 1860 (Felson and Cundiff, p. 601). Although the influx of a large number of people promoted urbanization, the society showed a vulgar, violent, and primitive atmosphere because the lower-class gold seekers accounted for most of the city’s population. In such a city, McTeague seemed to have escaped from the life of a miner, but in fact, he lived in another form of a mining area. He lived a regular but boring life, in which we could not see any life force. These were his only pleasures — to eat, to smoke, to sleep, and to play upon his concertina (Norris, p. 1). McTeague apparently had no self-awareness about women or love. But after meeting Trina, he found her feminine element which enlarged his narrow point of view on women, the whole sex. And he saw that there was something else in life besides concertinas and steam beer. The male, virile desire in him tardily awakened, aroused itself, strong and brutal (Norris, p. 19). Trina is similar to McTeague, whom Norris describes as “lived her life with as little self-consciousness as a tree” (Norris, p. 65). Therefore, when McTeague forcefully hugged and kissed Trina more than once, Trina was intoxicated by McTeague’s masculine charm and conquering behavior. They identified with each other’s animal instincts and created an almost perfect other in their imagination based on each other’s image, one was McTeague, a real man with dangerous charm, and the other was Trina, the most delicate and lovely woman. They were immersed in such fantasies. When McTeague bit Trina’s finger and used violence, the reader can even read the sense of tolerance and affection. The most exaggerated is that Trina and Maria discussed the domestic violence of their two husbands with each other, and even took a strange

sort of pride in recounting some particularly savage blow (Norris, p. 226). This is not love, but a fantasy based on animal instincts. Lacan uses animal experiments to explain the occurrence of the mirror stage. It is a necessary condition for the maturation of the gonad of the female pigeon that it should see another member of its species, of either sex; so sufficient in itself is this condition that the desired effect may be obtained merely by placing the individual within reach of the field of reflection of a mirror (Lacan, p. 443). McTeague and Trina were attracted to each other, tolerated each other, and developed their own selves. They gradually established their own subjectivity based on the image of the other. Trina transformed McTeague, making him dress more refined and behave more elegantly; because of Trina's stinginess, a fantasy about McTeague, and desire for submission, McTeague constantly reshaped the miner subject of "sluggish and dull man", promoting and encouraging the release of his violent factors. In the end, the marriage went to tragedy. According to Lacan's mirror theory, McTeague's subject was constantly shaped by the other, first, he was shaped into the image of a miner with his father as the other, and then he was shaped into a man of masculinity by Trina as the other. McTeague can be said to be a character who never had subjectivity. He had never shown his own thoughts and was a false subject who had become through identification with the other.

3. The Self Murdered by the Big Other and the Symbolic

In addition to the strangulation of the subject by the other, symbols also strangle people. Based on Saussure's research, Lacan reinterprets psychoanalysis with structural linguistics. In the essay "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud", Lacan uses a new diagram to replace Saussure's tree diagram to express the signifier and the signified. He uses two identical toilet doors as an example. If we want to distinguish the two doors, we still have to rely on the different signifiers. Therefore, Lacan emphasizes the priority of the signifier. A signifier does not refer to a signified but to another signifier. Here Lacan makes a metaphor. He believes that there is a signifying chain which is similar to the rings of a necklace that is a ring in another necklace made of rings (Lacan, p. 116). This is like when we need to look up the meaning of a word in the dictionary, we need to define it through the meaning of another word. The signifier always refers to another signifier, forming a signifier chain. Therefore, humans are caught in a continuous process of generating symbols. The emergence of signs and symbols also pronounces the death of things. In Lacan's view, symbolic signs constitute people. Only with the symbols created by people can people strive for their goals. Lacan believes that people are murdered by symbols from birth to death. In his essay "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis", he wrote: Symbols envelop the life of man in a network so total that they join together, before he comes into the world, those who are going to engender him 'by flesh and blood' ...so total that they give the words that will make him faithful or renegade, the law of the acts that will follow him right to the very place where he is not yet and even beyond his death... (Lacan, p. 50) Symbols run through people's lives and hollow out the meaning of people. In this novel, gold is the symbol that runs through the entire book. Gold was originally a metal substance without any meaning, but after people gave it

signifiers, gold became a symbol. In San Francisco in the mid-19th century, owning gold became people's ultimate pursuit, and gold also represented people's social status.

In the novel, there are direct and indirect reasons for McTeague's tragedy. Both reasons are related to the symbol of gold that runs through the whole text. The direct cause is reflected in the character Marcus. He and McTeague were good friends who lived in the same apartment building. When he learned that McTeague liked Trina, he gave her up to help McTeague. Later, he hated McTeague because Trina won a lottery of \$5,000, so he reported McTeague for not having a medical license. This move made McTeague lose his job and changed Trina's attitude towards McTeague. In essence, Marcus hated McTeague not because he liked Trina, but on the contrary, he objectified her into gold. He hated McTeague because he lost \$5,000. Marcus was controlled by artificial symbols. He ignored brotherhood in pursuit of money, hurting others and ultimately trapping himself. The indirect reason for McTeague to kill Trina was Trina herself. When McTeague lost his job, she fell into unprecedented money anxiety, and her thrifty instinct reached its peak. She began to dislike her husband who had no job and secretly saved money and showed no support and sympathy. When they still had enough savings, she forced McTeague to move into a smaller and more dilapidated apartment, abandoning the living conditions that she had worked hard to cultivate for McTeague, not letting him drink more expensive beer, and even not giving him car fare when he went to find a job in bad weather. Trina's stinginess and instinct to save money gradually angered McTeague, and with the sold concertina as the fuse, McTeague finally killed Trina. If Marcus hated McTeague so much because he wanted to get more gold, then Trina was reluctant to throw away a little gold, and even reached the point where she had to touch the real gold coins to confirm her existence. Trina was also a person who controlled by the symbol of gold. Her heart was empty except for this signifier. Her economic oppression of McTeague eventually led him into the symbolic trap of gold. Marcus' betrayal and Trina's stinginess made the numb and dull McTeague felt more suffocated in this golden city every day. Golden images constantly appear in the text. For example, the golden tooth, which was the store decoration that McTeague had always dreamed of, represents a further improvement in economic status; but when McTeague lost his job and moved into a more dilapidated house, it was only used to store dirty dishes, and was finally sold by McTeague to another dentist at a low price. The golden tooth here is another signifier of gold, which unconsciously controls McTeague's pursuit. Another example is the canary in McTeague's cage. Besides being a representation of McTeague's identity as a miner, it also shows that McTeague was in a similar situation as he was imprisoned in the city, stained by the symbol of gold without knowing it. McTeague was no exception in this city where everyone was chasing gold. Therefore, the symbol is created by the subject but controls the subject and eventually kills the subject. Studies have shown that during the gold rush, a large number of gold seekers poured into the city, most of whom were not well educated, and brought social customs of alcoholism and fighting to the city. Therefore, weak social control and economic motives led to high rates of all types of homicide, but particularly high rates of robbery homicide, a predatory offense. Also, there were feuds, vendettas, and duels increased during the gold rush (Felson & Cundiff, p. 602). This also confirms that in the novel,

McTeague's plunder of Trina's money and the life-and-death duel between Marcus and McTeague are all under the strong control of gold and capital. There is no winner in this game. McTeague was just an innocent individual who was symbolically murdered.

4. Conclusion

Lacan believes that people are influenced by the image of others in the mirror stage to form a false self, and then they are murdered by language signs and symbols in society. Therefore, there is the death of the subject of McTeague. McTeague first formed a miner's identity under the influence of his parents, and then identified with animal instincts under the influence of Trina. In a broader sense, he was also caught up by the power of symbol which is the gold in the society. His subject is destined to face tragedy. Through the Lacanian interpretation of this novel, we can better understand why it is called one of the representative works of naturalistic novels, and deeply appreciate the naturalistic thought in it, that is, the powerlessness of individuals facing the world and destiny. French novelist Émile Zola wrote in his essay "The Experimental Novel":

The social circulus is identical with vital circulus; in society, as in human beings, a solidarity exists which unites the different members and the different organisms in such a way that if one organ becomes rotten many others are tainted and a very complicated disease results. Hence, in our novels, when we experiment on a dangerous wound which poisons society, we proceed in the same way as the experimentalist doctor; we try to find the simple initial cause in order to reach the complex causes of which the action is the result. (Zola, p. 28)

Zola believes that the responsibility of a naturalist novelist is to find out the disease and then provide a treatment plan, just like a doctor. This also echoes what Norris said that a good novelist should weigh with the most relentless precision his every statement; in a word, possess a sense of his responsibility (Norris, p. 1). Norris used the most direct, cold, and simple words to describe the social appearance of San Francisco in the 19th century for readers.

With such sincere naturalist novelists, we should find inspiration in their works. By focusing on McTeague's individual fate and analyzing it with Lacan's subject theory, readers can see the victims of an era and the subjectivity that never existed. McTeague's death of the subject is not individual, but universal. This also inspires us today, under the influence of others and in a society full of various symbols, how we should try our best to stay thoughtful and sober to avoid the death of the subject like McTeague.

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