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Research Article

Approaching Mrs. Slipslop, Uncle Toby and Mr. Bounderby from a Modern Individual Psychology Perspective

Yasir Mutlib Abdullah

Department of English, College of Arts, University of Anbar, 31020, Iraq

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*Corresponding author:

E-mail:

yasirliterature77@uoanbar.edu.iq

ABSTRACT

The paper examines the psychological superiority/inferiority complexes coined by Alfred Adler (1870-1937) in three selected characters from different novels: Mrs. Slipslop from Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1742), Uncle Toby from Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759) and Mr. Bounderby from Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854). These complexes are traced in the characters and associated with how they are induced by the characters' physical and social deformities. The paper attempts to demonstrate that such psychological complexes in the character make it difficult for him/her to communicate as well as interact with others around them. Such deformities become whimsical obsessions that alienate them from their society and disorder their lives particularly at communication and result in impossibility of mutual understanding. The paper also highlights such complexes on the linguistic level.

Keywords: *superiority complex, inferiority complex, deformities, obsessions*

Background

The chosen characters are selected from three different English novels by authors belonging to different eras. Such novels have always been interpreted according to their times, social, political and philosophical backgrounds. This article rereads the selected characters from a psychological point of view to try to approach them according to modern psychological perspective.

Introduction

The paper relies on the interpretations of Alfred Adler's theory of individual psychology namely superiority and inferiority complexes and tries to approach the characters under discussion accordingly. Alfred Adler believes that superiority complex is based on an excessive "striving" to conceal hidden feelings of inferiority (Wexberg 1929, 35). According to Adler's theory of individual psychology, the individual strives to overcome as well as resist any feelings of inferiority by compensating them with a psychologically unconscious

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cover-up. This cover-up is termed as superiority complex. For Adler, the individual with inferiority feeling is socially inadequate and copes with his inadequacy to "escape from his difficulty". He also argues that there is a feeling of inferiority behind any individual behaving as "superior to others, which calls for very special efforts of concealment." (Ansbacher 1956, 297).

According to the above explanation, the paper aims to apply such concept on selected characters from different novels in order to highlight the possibility of approaching them from a psychological angle. The first characters to be submitted to the inferiority/ superiority theory are from Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.

Results and Discussion

Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* 1742 was considered the first novel which was published in full in English literature. It surpassed the novels before it especially Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in subject matter and scope. Although it concentrates on the noted character of Joseph Andrews and his mentor Parson Adams, the novel tackles other several interesting characters that have become classics in English novel, such as Lady Booby, Parsons Barnabas and Trulliber and the Tow-wouses. Besides highlighting many social issues in the early 18th century, Fielding postulates the foibles and follies of people of the time. He is also a master of character sketching by presenting types that remain comparable to any one in any time. One of such prominent characters is Mrs. Slipslop. The character of Mrs. Slipslop is so interesting and intriguing at the same time. Mrs. Slipslop is obsessed with her social status. She always claims that she used to belong to an aristocratic family but some unfortunate circumstances had happened that resulted in her present situation as Lady Booby's waiting-gentlewoman. Again this is a kind of social flaw that induces psychological crisis. Her sense of inferiority puts her in a critical situation with her mistress. Mrs. Slipslop's inferiority stems also from her physical ugliness. Fielding presents Lady Booby and Slipslop as social counterparts. Class distinction plays an important role in dramatizing the unequal parallelism between

the two women. On the social level they are unequal but on the moral level they are the same. Wiesenfarth (1973) points at this parallelism by saying that "both are unchaste, both are hypocritical, and both want revenge. The parallelism also suggests that Lady Booby is as spiritually ugly as Slipslop is physically ugly". (358)

Being in her mid-forties, lame, short and fat with big nose, she is portrayed as unattractive and laughable. Her vanity is fueled with how other characters address her. Joseph, for example always addresses her as your ladyship, which implicitly pleases her. She is ridiculously proud of herself and looks at Mrs. Grave-airs and Fanny Goodwill as her inferiors. Her old age can present a crisis for her especially when encountering young Joseph. Joseph in some critical moment addresses her like in the following situation:

I have always loved you as well as if you had been my own mother." "How, sirrah!" says Mrs. Slipslop in a rage; "your own mother? Do you assinate that I am old enough to be your mother? I don't know what a stripling may think, but I believe a man would refer me to any greensickness silly girl whatsoever: but I ought to despise you rather than be angry with you, for referring the conversation of girls to that of a woman of sense." (*Joseph Andrews*, 42)

Her vanity is her psychic obsession through which she finds a substitute for physical deformity. She always boasts of being a waiting-gentlewoman in Booby's household. Slipslop's preoccupation with social standing for Varey (1986) makes her brag of a social level she does not really belong to (66).

Slipslop's vanity stems from what Fielding terms as social affectation which is hence unnatural. Inferiority of social status is also revealed through the linguistic level of the character. Slipslop's choice of grand language, which Joseph occasionally does not comprehend what lies behind, and which she thinks effective and luring, indicates this inferiority in her exchange with him. Crowley (1996) is of opinion that "Mrs. Slipslop has the intention of seducing the young Andrews, and her language reveals the inferiority of her gender, class and morality... Slipslop's lack of virtue and social

status are given away in her misuse of words..." (93).

In many occasions also Slipslop boasts that her father is a curate and has a thorough knowledge of theology. That is why she always tends to indulge in a prolonged conversation with Parson Adams. His boastful demeanor exposes hidden lack of self-confidence. So she relies on self-deception to overcome such deformity.

Mrs Slipslop, the waiting-gentlewoman, being herself the daughter of a curate, preserved some respect for Adams: she professed great regard for his learning, and would frequently dispute with him on points of theology; but always insisted on a deference to be paid to her understanding, as she had been frequently at London, and knew more of the world than a country parson could pretend to. (34)

Her hypocritical character tries to complicate the words with Adams and confuse him with many theological terminologies just to win the argument.

Tristram Shandy, published in nine volumes from 1759- 1767, starts from Tristram's interrupted conception. The interrupted conception happens at the very wedding night when his mother abruptly starts with an eccentric question of Mr. Walter if he had remembered to wind the house clock. This event opens the novel and spots its peculiar narrative structure, especially the fact that the birth of the protagonist in *Tristram Shandy* does not happen until the third volume. The novel also recounts the misfortunes that afflict Tristram at birth when the man-midwife, Dr. Slop accidentally mutilates Tristram's nose with his forceps and later deformity of Tristram's name from the authoritative implication of "Trismegistus" to Tristram when the maidservant Susannah disfigured his father's intended name. The unfortunate circumstance-bound accidents are thus sources of the prevalent structural and sarcastic features of the novels under discussion.

As one of the 18th-century novels, *Tristram Shandy* is heavily a drama of family reflection on the human foibles and affectations in a sentimental framework. It stages the contradictions of the members of the Shandy household.

Walter, Tristram's father, has a queer but exquisite obsession that opinionates his philosophy of names. Walter is extensively overwhelmed by writing his own system of education called *Tristrapædia* while he ignores his duty for his son's education. Uncle Toby's wound in the sensitive organ at the siege of Namur leaves him impotent and unfit for the service which generates later his physical-psycho complex that makes him threatened in the vicinity of middle age women, particularly by Widow Wadman forceful advances. The more he contemplates his misfortune the more obsessed and frustrated he becomes in trying to explain what has exactly happened to him in an unconscious attempt to compensate for his injury. As he is confined in his room for recuperation, "a thought came into his head, that if he could purchase such a thing, and have it pasted down upon a board, as a large map of the fortifications of the town and citadel of *Namur*, with its environs, it might be a means of giving him ease" (75). This map will later in the novel become the central psychological outlet for uncle Toby to vent as well as patch his feeling of incompetence.

Toby's physical wound develops into what is termed in *Tristram Shandy* as "hobby-horse" which is in its essence the characters' extreme psychological indulgence in some fixed concept in order to view and interpret the world around them. Uncle Toby's obsession with his groin injury therefore could be read thematically deeper than what is on the pages of the novel. The inferiority complex associated with the physical impairment in *Tristram Shandy* is hinted at in several instances. Tristram indicates this concept in one of his lengthy speeches about his uncle Toby:

WHEN my uncle *Toby* got his map of *Namur* to his mind, he began immediately to apply himself, and with the utmost diligence, to the study of it; for nothing being of more importance to him than his recovery, and his recovery depending, as you have read, upon the passions and affections of his mind, it behoved him to take the nicest care to make himself so far master of his subject, as to be able to talk upon it without emotion. (*Tristram Shandy* 2005, 79)

Uncle Toby's recuperation is thus associated with his mental coming into terms with his deformity. Sterne wrote within the sentimental norms that centered their perspectives on the combination of the mind and body found in contemporary philosophers' production, namely John Locke's theory of association of ideas as part of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Locke's essay encompasses reflections on the role of ideas in human communication. He stresses that because empiricism is the source of knowledge, the complexity and simplicity of ideas vary accordingly. According to Locke, Hobbes and other contemporary thinkers, complex ideas are the production of the mind and simple ideas are obtained from empirical sensations. Kallich (1945) reports that Locke and Hobbes in effect investigate how so complicatedly the language works in the human mental activity that the linguistic meaning in real life situations is somehow impossible to achieve (290).

Sterne's employment as well as repeatedly hinting at this sense in his novel can be viewed with modern lenses of lack as well as frustration of communication which stems from the complexity of the operation of the human mind. And because the mind is the center of thoughts, it consists of a lot of ideas and sensations connected and disconnected. One form of such diversity in human mental operation of the mind is the concept of so called hobby-horse.

Most of the hobby-horses that will be discussed hereafter crystallize the key obstacle in certain discourses in the novel. The hobby-horses and private obsessiveness confine the characters of the Shandy household. Walter is also so immersed in the theory of philosophy and names that his mind is bounded and inaccessible by others no matter how hard he tries to clarify. But what strikes more effectively is Sterne's presentation of uncle Toby. Toby is described first as a character enjoying making fun of and interested in the art of warfare and fortifications with his loyal servant Corporal Trim. This is his hobby-horse all of his military life until he receives groin injury. Since the day of his injury, uncle Toby is much ashamed as well as concerned with not to be known by other men and women. Tristram's father, Walter

keeps on telling his visitors about Toby's wound which infuriates Toby, "he would often take my father aside, in the greatest concern imaginable, to expostulate and tell him, he would give him anything in the world, only to let the story rest". (*Tristram Shandy* 60).

Toby's mutilation develops into a trauma when it comes to psychological interpretation. Eagleton (2005) argues that *Tristram Shandy* is a novel different from the novels that preceded it. The characters' misfortunes are so unique that their individualities are not like Defoe's and Richardson's. They effectively:

... add up to the trauma which we have to repress in order to become human subjects at all. There is an obscure wound or injury somewhere at the very origin of the human subject – a kind of primordial Fall which we have to get over in order to become functioning individuals, but whose scars will continue to make their presence felt throughout our lives. For some, this is known as the unconscious; and Sterne in his own pre-Freudian way was mightily aware of it (82).

The trauma of wounds that fills the novel is technically what characterizes Tristram's world. Only when the conversations turn to the accident does uncle Toby find a common ground and relief to communicate and maybe understood by his visitors whom he thinks unable to get him right about the injury if he does not give a detailed account of it.

These conversations were infinitely kind; and my uncle *Toby* received great relief from them, and would have received much more, but that they brought him into some unforeseen perplexities... These perplexing rebuffs gave my uncle *Toby Shandy* more perturbations than you would imagine; and as my father's kindness to him was continually dragging up fresh friends and fresh inquirers,—he had but a very uneasy task of it (69-74).

These "perplexities" begin as physical and then the turn psychological when it comes to expressing himself in the novel's discourses. In his description of uncle Toby, the narrator justifies that words have little meaning, and uncle Toby's frequent attempts at making sense is

futile. He remarkably mentions that “’Twas not by ideas,——by heaven! his life was put in jeopardy by words” (78). The rumor of uncle Toby’s impotency has spread but Corporal Trim with the help of Toby’s map tries to explain that the rumor is not true. Trim tells Toby that Widow Wadman’s real concern in his wound is to know whether Toby has become impotent. Once this is revealed uncle Toby’s impotency has turned to impotency of communication.

Hanebeck (2017), in this respect, argues that willing and unwilling misunderstanding characterizes Sterne’s *Trstram Shandy*, especially when it comes to conversations between Wadman and Toby involving sensitive subjects – Toby’s groin injury (232). In many dialogues Widow Wadman would always try to get to the fact behind where exactly Toby’s wound is while in many instances in the novel Toby would always seem to willingly or unwillingly avoid her advances and innuendos. Uncle Toby invites Wadman to see the place on the map where he gets his wound. Wadman misunderstands his intention by thinking that he is showing her the wound itself. Such situational misunderstanding and lack of communication fills the narrative of *Tristram Shandy*, “—You shall see the very place, Madam; said my uncle Toby. Mrs. Wadman blush’d—look’d towards the door—turn’d pale—blush’d slightly again—recovered her natural colour—blush’d worse than ever...” (567).

Upon noticing and realizing that Widow Wadman misunderstands the point, uncle Toby recoils after the dialogue has come to such a crisis. His behavior interestingly reveals that he tries to escape the situation. He orders Trim to bring the map immediately, “my uncle Toby had risen from the sofa, and got to the other side of the parlour-door, to give Trim an order about it in the passage—”

Tristram himself is mutilated after his birth. He is accidentally circumcised by a window sash. He also remains confined in his private world of writing the novel trying to explain why and how he becomes what he is. Eagleton further points out that such kinds of sensitive wounds alienate them from each other on the linguistic level, “For this ‘wound’ is what makes him a subject in the first place, and as such forever evades the reach of language” (83).

Toby and Tristram share the same dilemma of the pointlessness of communication. Uncle Toby pointlessly attempts to spot for others exactly where the wound is received by his recurrent remodeling of the battle accident in which he is injured with the help of the map. His physical impotency turns into psychological impotency and leaves him frustrated whenever he expresses the matter to women. His disability after the injury is compensated by this war model. In this respect, Friedli (1977) remarkably points out that only when he explains the story of his groin injury that his functionality as a soldier is restored (112).

By means of creating a world of near disabilities Sterne could present his major characters in a state of withdrawal. Friedli also explains that the characters consequently live a world “with hardly any connection with the outside world” (113). That is why Uncle Toby resorts to his room to try to come to terms with his injury and to recover his problem of communication. The awkward limitation of expression captivates him to one circle of words. Probyn (1987) remarks that for most of the novel each character is as self-imprisoned as any of Samuel Beckett’s characters. Sterne’s expression of the imprisonment is the concept of hobby-horse (138). Uncle Toby’s mind for Probyn is locked into military strategies which create “a linguistic black hole... from which no light escapes.” (139). For Uncle Toby the sexual inadequacy finds in the hobby-horse a subconscious substitute for a prison that cannot be unlocked.

Mr. Bounderby in Dickens’s *Hard Times* (1854) is represented as a prolific capitalist. Because he owns a bank and a factory in Coketown, he represents the negative aspects of exploitation of the factory life and industrialization. Dickens stresses that wealth and money determine the individuals with power while bloodline, titles and origin determines their social status in a capitalist and industrialized society. Bounderby’s background is sketched early in the novel. He boasts time and time again as having been brought up as an orphan and in a ditch although Dickens makes it clear that Bounderby’s origin is unknown. This is the basic character portrayal of Josiah Bounderby in *Hard Times*. In view of the subject

matter of the physical mutilation under discussion, what strikes as remarkable about his character can be interpreted not as physical deformity but a social one.

Bounderby exists with a psychological problem that could have been generated from an inferiority complex at birth. To compensate this, he sets out to declare to his listeners his destitution, "I hadn't a shoe to my foot. As to a stocking, I didn't know such a thing by name. I passed the day in a ditch, and the night in a pigsty. That's the way I spent my tenth birthday. Not that a ditch was new to me, for I was born in a ditch." (*Hard Times*, 18). Bounderby in any discourse tries to confirm by using any convincing means whatsoever that he is not responsible for his childhood misfortune.

My mother left me to my grandmother,' said Bounderby; 'and, according to the best of my remembrance, my grandmother was the wickedest and the worst old woman that ever lived. If I got a little pair of shoes by any chance, she would take 'em off and sell 'em for drink. Why, I have known that grandmother of mine lie in her bed and drink her four-teen glasses of liquor before breakfast! (19).

Bounderby describes more and more his history whenever he is with people and particularly, Mrs. Gradgrind, who always believes what he tells her. What is worth noticing here is that his speech implicates more psychological trouble than what appears on the surface. In the following speech, he is mentally occupied with the memories of the crisis of childhood. He is unraveling some deep complex:

She kept a chandler's shop,' pursued Bounderby, 'and kept me in an eggbox. That was the cot of my infancy; an old egg-box. As soon as I was big enough to run away, of course I ran away. Then I became a young vagabond; and instead of one old woman knocking me about and starving me, everybody of all ages knocked me about and starved me. They were right; they had no business to do anything else. I was a nuisance, an incumbrance, and a pest. I know that very well. (19)

On the subconscious level, Bounderby is covering up his sense of degradation and

degeneration with a linguistic manipulation and phonetic device. With his loud repugnant voice, he tells others that he is a self-made man in an implicit attempt to embed in people's minds that he is now worthy of respect. "His pride in having at any time of his life achieved such a great social distinction as to be a nuisance, an incumbrance, and a pest, was only to be satisfied by three sonorous repetitions of the boast". (19) This is again to compensate for his past degeneration. On the linguistic level, Bounderby sustains a state of self-suspicion that makes his communication with others fail, unless, he thinks, he pitches the tune too high. This self-suspicion generated from lack of self-esteem stands in the middle between his attempts at clarification and others' appalling reaction, which makes him susceptible to ridicule.

Bounderby, in fact, never stops narrating how he was abandoned by his mother and associates it with almost any occasion and situation even if it is unrelated. When Bounderby and Gradgrind find out that Sissy's father has abandoned her, upon her disappointment and sorrow, Bounderby delivers a long sarcastic speech about why her father deserted her if he claims he loves her. Bounderby's mental state becomes so preoccupied with the effect of the situation that it finds an outlet of the same story.

Good!' interrupted Mr. Bounderby. 'This is good, Gradgrind! A man so fond of his daughter, that he runs away from her! This is devilish good! Ha! ha! ... I haven't always occupied my present station of life. I know what these things are. You may be astonished to hear it, but my mother - ran away from me... I was born in a ditch, and my mother ran away from me. Do I excuse her for it? No. Have I ever excused her for it? Not I. What do I call her for it? I call her probably the very worst woman that ever lived in the world... (36 -37)

He even goes to more extreme when he pays his mother some money in order not to spoil his fabricated character in front of others when his personality is unveiled. Thus, like Toby, Bounderby's obsession with his own past

obstructs the communication channel between him and his audience.

Conclusions

If put under modern psychological lenses, the selected characters clearly show another dimension which could be invisible for the traditional readers' eyes. This dimension has been exposed and diagnosed as inferiority complex induced by either physical or social shortcomings. This inferiority is compensated by superiority behavior to cover up and unconsciously escape certain life situations which lead to complication as well as lack of communication between the characters in the novels. Thus, Fielding, Sterne and Dickens are masters of character portrayal.

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