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A Psychoanalytical

Reading of Cormac McCarthy's *The Child of God*

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Abstract

Cormac McCarthy is an acclaimed author of America who is well known for the depiction of the South, especially with its gloomy, murky, and ghostly setup. His characters are mostly fallen with despair and tensions which are the prevailing elements in his novels. The presence of haunting feeling overtakes the readers with unexpected twists and bump into awkward characters. His novel *Child of God* portrays Lester Ballard who is mentally disturbed as he is been ignored by society. This withdrawal from society is forced on him and his reactions to the rigid society make him an outlaw and push him further to the periphery. His mental declination is due to rejection and lack of connection with society. This paper thus focuses on the psychological changes in the main character in the light of Freud's psychoanalysis.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, Necrophilia, Isolation, Transference, Displacement, Repression.

1. Introduction

The novel *Child of God* is a story about a young man who became an orphan at the young age of eight. There is no mother figure as she has run away from her husband. The father is a complete failure and commits suicide when the boy is just eight. The boy could not comprehend what death is and calls his neighbors to inform them who cut the body down leaving the rope still hanging from the beam of the barn. No one thereafter cared for the boy and the only companion for him is his father's rifle which he carries wherever he goes. Freud's psychoanalysis is applied to analyze the psyche of the main character.

The novel opens with the auction scene in which the readers see the main character, Lester Ballard, as a young man who is thrown out of his own house for which the reason is unknown to him. But the readers are intimated that he failed to pay the tax and as a result is thrown out of the house and the government sells his property. The first scene itself informs that Ballard has a problem possibly a mental disorder which is yet to be discovered with the increase in the chain of events. The people of the county, who are not bothered so far about Lester, are ready to hunt him when it comes to business and money. When Lester tries to retaliate, he is attacked and thrown out of his own house without any consideration from the people. From this point, people started calling him "he's not right". One of the town's men

observed, “He never could hold his head right after that” (COG 9). The orphaned Ballard behaves strangely and one of the townsperson recounts,

They say he never was right after his daddy killed his self. They were just the one boy. The mother had run off, I don't know where to nor who with. Me and Cecil Edwards was the ones cut him down. He come in the store and told it like you'd tell it was raining out. We went up there and walked in the barn and I seen his feet hangin. He stood there and watched, never said anything. (COG 21)

He was only left with his father's rifle. The choosing of his father's possession is indicative. The young man could have chosen anything else, but he particularly chooses his father's rifle because he has seen his father with that while he was young and wrongly connects that possession as his father possibly to safeguard himself from the otherwise unsafe world. This is called transference as termed by Freud. Lester's emotions and loneliness are redirected to the rifle so he feels the presence of his father. He, as a young boy has witnessed his father roaming with the rifle which influenced him with the thought that only the rifle can save him after his father from this cruel world. So the mode of communication he expresses to the world is a weapon probably for others but to him a symbol of protection. The still hanging rope in the barn indicates the hovering spirit of failure that his father faced that follows Lester presently.

Without parental and societal guidance, Ballard does not have the proper knowledge to exist as a functioning member of society. Lester, according to the narrative, is a man in his late twenties. He has slept in the place where his father died, apparently for many years. His apparent need to feel close to his father and to be in the one place he feels at home is not an acceptable utterance to the community and they do not receive it. The house itself stands as the symbol of the presence of his father hence he tends to visit the house often in the novel. Lester Ballard's only acquaintance with society is his friendship with a dump keeper, with whom he spends his time apart from hunting. He is attracted to the dump keeper's immoral daughters who rebuke him for his advancements.

Lester Ballard's connection with the dump keeper leads him to have little knowledge about females especially about his daughters who flirt around and get pregnant. Initially, the sexual desire in Ballard has risen because of such incidents he comes across. The second incident has a great impact on him as witnesses the frog mountain world. All these incidences make his id have a stronghold on him. These instances make the readers understand how his pre-necrophile self has come in.

The normal flow of words takes a turn towards awful incidents when once in the middle of his hunting near the frog mountain, he encounters a pair of lovers who are dead while making love inside their car. This was the first time that he becomes aware of such things. He wanted to imitate the posture of the dead boy and rehearses it with the dead girl inside the car and finds no disapproval from the girl.

So he decides to take the girl's body along with him to his so-called house to be his companion forever. He hides her body in the attic of the house and pulls her down when he feels lonely. But this is a contradictory situation. Why does he want to keep her in the attic? Perhaps, due to the fear of separation from her, as in the case with his father, his house, and the destroyed cabin by the hounds he hides her. So whenever he wants to talk he pulls her down. She becomes his companion to talk, share, and console while making love. “He poured into that waxen ear everything he'd ever thought of saying to a woman” (COG 88). His abnormality reaches its peak when he goes to the town and purchases a dress for her. All his repressed feelings come out of him while he is with her. This shows that he is longing for someone to care for him and vice versa and to be with him.

The readers find that society has not ensured his love, care, concern, and affection instead has given him loneliness, abandonment, identity crisis which had led him to lead such a ghastly life. When society denies fulfilling its duty humans become devastating beings insecure with the misled destination. Lester

Ballard is a sad figure despite his untiring trial to build a relationship with the neighbors; he has been mistreated by them. He wanted to take revenge against the man who took over his house. So he disturbs him often by stealing his fowls and trying to shoot him down as well. Again transference is seen in Ballard as his anger on Mr. Geer is redirected towards his fowl and thus commits the act of stealing. His connectivity with the house is very strong as it is his source of protection and a place to belong.

The author portrays that Ballard is the Id of society. He is a mirror according to the Jungian concept and the product of imitation and the author emphasizes that no one escapes his/ her reflection that is seen in Ballard. This reflection is Ballard. He becomes a serial killer and commits necrophilia due to his haunting loneliness and through the act of murder; he willfully extends his family and the fear that he would be separated from his extended family, the family of corpses. He wants to relive his past that is, the life he led with his father thus extends his inanimate family. This act again is compared with displacement as he longs to be with a family and is been rejected by the society he creates a one as he likes. In this, his emotions are displaced from real to inanimate. This fear is again the same which he underwent with the sudden separation from his father and then from his house.

He is rejected in the church which is a parody because the church is known as a place for love. But in Ballard's case, the church has forgotten its primary duty of love and compassion for a fellow being. "When Ballard came in the church with his hat in his hand and shut the door and sat alone on the rear bench...a windy ruffle of whisper went among them" (COG 31). Ballard is still a stranger to the community though people knew his whereabouts and at this point, he has done no crime. This is another crucial moment that the readers could clearly understand that it is only the society and not him to be blamed for any mishaps thereafter.

Once in the woods, he tries to save an unconscious woman. When he wakes her up she starts to yell and throw stones at him. Later she ends up falsely accusing him of raping her while he tried to help her. This helping tendency seems to be a Freudian slip of his longingness to be accepted by society. But the result is different. The more he tries to connect himself with the community, the more he is thrown away and denied any relationship.

There is one advantage for the main character is that the readers knew Ballard right from the beginning before he could land up as a serial killer. So instead of threat, anger, and awkwardness, the readers become sympathetic towards Ballard. They could understand the reason why Ballard is weird in such a way as the writer showed his history early at the beginning of the book. And it is so evident that it is not a deliberate action from Ballard but just a reaction to what he had seen and received from society.

The readers could bring back memories of how Ballard grew up. They see him as deeply disturbed, a man-child, nearly incapacitated by his mental deficiencies; his thoughts opaque and unknowable in the extreme, profoundly sociopathic and eventually psychopathic, but they never see him as anything but one of their own gone wrong. Society can connect him with them as he shares their good and inner bad hidden desires. That is why the author mentions him as a "Child of God much like yourself perhaps" (COG 4). The novel clearly states that the problem is not with Ballard but with a society that fails to bring up an orphan child.

2. Conclusion

Thus the paper analyses the psyche of Lester Ballard which was mainly built on the impact created by society. The author presents him as a child of God because he is psychologically a challenging child who imitates society and acts as a mirror of society as well. Thus the traits of psychoanalysis are prevalent in the novel by focusing on the main character.

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