

Psychological Analysis of *Humboldt's Gift* from the Perspective of Lacan's Theory

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Abstract

Two protagonists Humboldt and Citrine in Humboldt's gift are characterized as restless even lunatic, for they are constantly or madly seeking something such as honor, power or intimate relationship something or other. This thesis intends to analyze Humboldt and Citrine's psychological troubles from the perspective of Lacan's theory and reveal that Humboldt and Citrine's psychological problem are rooted in the sense of fragmentation and lack caused by the separation from mother, and their struggle to seek safety and satisfaction is further destroyed by the industrialism and materialism prevalent in this novel.

Keywords: imagery order, symbolic order, industrialism, castration, fragmented

1. Introduction

The symptom of mania is prominent in the novel *Humboldt's Gift* which mainly tells about two writers' dilemma and frustrations in the 1970s. The two writers Humboldt and Citrine suffered the mania in different level, and their nutty stroke the reader as depressive and impressive. Peter explored Citrine's paranoia and manic depression and Humboldt's madness from the perspective of social culture. "the agony of the individual poet in a mass society, the relationship between art and business, the relationship between spiritual and material, the dislocation of modern American culture from its European history"(Hyland, 1992). In Peter's view, the two intellectuals' problems are caused by their failure to compromise with the materialistic society. Bigler explored this madness topic, and he thought being manic or nut is a way for the narrator Citrine to protect himself from this absurd world and other subordinate characters who are unable to understand his soul. And moreover, Bigler thought in Charlie's view, Humboldt's testimony to a historicist's point of view and his resuscitation of Platonic, Romantic and Jamesian values leads to a new form of sanity by Charlie's standard (Bigler, 1998). Bigler's thesis starts from the culture and philosophical view, while this thesis intends to explore their psychological disorder from Lacan's theory.

According to Lacan, the human Psyche consists of three parts, the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real (Bressler 156). The moment when the baby realizes his independent beings separated from his mother, he feels the lack of safety and fragmentation, the sense of lack will haunt him all his life. And in the symbolic stage, the father stands between mother and the child, and threatens to castrate the child when the child does not obey the social rules or laws he stands for. For Lacan, castration is symbolic, not literal, and represents each person's loss of wholeness and his or her acceptance of society's rules (Bressler, 2003). So, in Lacan's theory, man's psyche is in the state of lack and self-fragmented, and what man longs for is love, physical happy and countless objects, but nothing can fulfill our desire to return to the imaginary stage and to be one with our mother.

The world in *Humboldt's Gift* is fragmented and materialized, and two writers in the novel suffered mania in different level and their desire to reach the state of wholeness and fulfillment is thwarted by society. Two writers' passion for literature is a passage for them to return to the imaginary order, but the materialized society crashes the only approach for them to reach the wholeness and sense of safety.

2. The Way to Restore the Fulfillment and Safety in the Imaginary World

2.1 Poem helping Humboldt Return to a Satisfying State

The sense of lack and fragmentation is manifested in Humboldt's indulgence in poem and history. Humboldt attained his fame in 1930s through one famous poem *Harlequin Ballads*, and was lost in reading history and

Freud. Humboldt's mania is revealed in his frantic indulgence in "Poetry, Beauty, Love, Waste Land, Alienation, History and the Unconscious" (Bellow, 1986). In Lacan's theory, lack and fragmentation haunt man all the time and literary text holds the possibility of capturing our desire to return to the imaginary order and to regain that sense of pure joy we felt when we were whole and united with our mothers. Through literature, a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction was established in Humboldt's life. He was a wonderful talker and Literature was Humboldt's real wealth. The world of literature gave Humboldt identity and fame which temporarily filled the hallow caused by sense of lack. Desire to participate in history was another way to fulfill the sense of lack and reach the jubilation of wholeness. "According to him, America's great Manic Depressive was Lincoln...if Energy is Delight and if Exuberance is Beauty, the Manic Depressive knows more about delight and beauty than anyone else. Who else has so much energy and exuberance? Maybe it's the strategy of the Psyche to increase Depression. So the more Pain the intenser the Happiness" (Bellow, 1986). Anxiety arises when the baby senses his separation with his mother as an individual, and this anxiety will accompany him all his life and inspire a strong desire to return to be one with his mother. But when the baby learns the impossibility to be one part of his mother, depression emerges and this desire to be with mother might be satisfied by trying to link himself with the external object. While depression and pain was paralleled with happiness by Humboldt who intended to fill the void with pains by which the person was able to perceive the lack and endowed with great power to fill the lack. Thus, having a role play in the history development providing the sense of fulfillment that being involved in the history events temporarily dispels the lack. Lincoln, the history leader, was a representative of Manic Depressive in his eyes. "Humboldt was especially attached to the World historical Individual, the interpreter of the Spirit, the mysterious leader who imposed on Mankind the task of understanding him, etc" (Bellow, 1986).

2.2 Intimate Relationship Bringing Citrine Safety and Fulfillment Lost in the Imaginary World

The sense of lack and fragmentation also embodied in another Writer Citrine's constant dream to be in woman's warm arms. In the novel, Citrine had several romantic relationships, but all turned to be void. His best memory was with Naomi who was his girl friend in his emotional adolescence. "When I loved Naomi Lutz I was safely within life. Its phenomenon added up, they make sense. Death was an after all acceptable part of the proposition" (Bellow, 1986). Being with Naomi gave Citrine the strongest safety which was similar to the sense of safety in the imaginary stage when his desire was always satisfied by the mother. The warmth and satisfaction were vividly illuminated in the description "among the frozen twigs I made myself warm inside her raccoon coat. There was a delicious mixture of coon skin and maiden fragrance. We breathed frost and kissed" (Bellow, 1986). "warm", "delicious", "fragrance" the three words expressed comforts Naomi provided to him through the sense of feeling and smell, which was very near to the satisfactory state when being with his Mum in the imaginary order. Thus Naomi in the novel was the incarnation of mother. "I couldn't think what a blessed life I might have led with Naomi Lutz. Fifteen thousand nights embracing Naomi and I would have smiled at the solitude and boredom of the grave" (Bellow, 1986). The sense of safety and satisfaction provided by Naomi overwhelmed the horror of death haunting Citrine all the time, and lying in Naomi's breast was like reaching the wholeness when he was in reunion with his mother. The sense of lack and safety was not satisfied when Citrine lived with his ex-wife Denise who in his memory was vicious and greedy, "Denise's huge radial amethyst eyes in combination with a low-lined forehead and sharp sibylline teeth supported this interpretation. She is exquisite, and terribly fierce" (Bellow, 1986). Denise's voracity for money and fame pushed Citrine to blend into a society where he failed to find the warmth he wanted in his unconsciousness. His next girl friend Renata was a woman with great sexy charming, the only one who was able to compete with Naomi. Renata was Citrine's young girl friend when he was in his middle ages. The charming of Renata lies in her sexy body and her youth which was able to arouse Citrine's strong sexual desire and the illusion of return to the youth. Citrine even compared the sleeping with Renata to a fulfillment provided by death. "I could go to Renata's room at once and get out of my clothes and into bed with her. Not from lust but from eagerness. I was full of a boundless need to give and take comfort" (Bellow, 1986). Just as Citrine said what drove him to be with Renata was not lust but the demand of the sense of comfort which was embedded in a child's mind since he came to the world. What's more, he even compared the desire to sleeping with Renata as a rush to death which was the essential way to fulfill the sense of wholeness. According to Lacan, a brief moment of joy or terror of desire that somehow arises from deep within our unconscious psyche and reminds us of a time of perfect wholeness when we were incapable of differentiating among images from the real order (Bressler, 2003). More often than not, these experiences are sexual, although other images and experiences such as birth and death can serve this function. In the light of Lacan's theory, sexual behavior is equivalent to death when it provides the sense of satisfaction to human beings.

3. Material Society Functioning as the Form of Castration for the Writers

3.1 Symbolic Castration of Humboldt in the Material Society

Lacan maintains that entering the Symbolic order is a form of castration for either sex. For Lacan, castration is symbolic, not literal and represents each person's loss of wholeness and his or her acceptance of society's rules (Bressler, 2003). Father in this stage functions as the power of the society and the object that blocks his desire for sexual union with his mother. The society in the *Humboldt's Gift* is materialized and people in the world feel more fragmented and alienated because people become the slaves of materialization in the endless desire for material. In fact, the world in HG symbolically functions as the Father who forced the people in the novel to accept and obey the law of industry and destroyed the possibility to return to a premier sense of safety and wholeness. Humboldt and Citrine are the typical men castrated by the society. When the age of mania and poem went away, Humboldt lost his glory. He longed to be a part in the government and save the society through poem and philosophy, but the failure of Stevenson in Presidential election broke his dream. He wanted to gain a position as professor in Princeton University, but the downfall of Longersloff also despaired him. To be involved in the history or become a great poet is the way for Humboldt to fill the sense of lack and reach safety and satisfaction. The world of poem to Humboldt is like the world in an imaginary order where he was able to find satisfaction and safety, but when the safety world was broken by the development of the society, the only approach to reach the state of wholeness for Humboldt was destroyed, and he was lost in the mania and depression. Humboldt's mania is revealed in his suspect of his wife's chasteness and violent behavior toward his wife. "Why did she let her father sell her to Rockefeller? How was it with Rockefeller? Did Rockefeller's penis thrill her more? Did the billions enter in? Did Rockefeller have to take a woman away from a poet in order to get it up?" (Bellow, 1986) Humboldt's suspect of his wife Kathleen had an affair with Rockefeller implied his suspect of his own sexual ability. 'Rockefeller' was the symbol of the industrial society, and his "Penis" symbolized the overwhelming power of the society which couldn't be surpassed. Thus the hallucination Rockefeller snatched his wife implied the materialized society deprived the poet of the potent ability to attain wholeness and safety through poem, which symbolically meant the poet had been castrated physically and mentally. As a result of castration, Humboldt got caught in mania and became self-split. "Humboldt tried to run down Kathleen in his car. Humboldt punched Kathleen in the belly, doubling her up. Then he pulled her by the hair into the Buick" (Bellow, 1986). When he assumed Kathleen had an affair with a young man called Magnasco and even tried to kill Magnasco, his self-split was aggravated. Be it Rockefeller or Magnasco, they were Humboldt's hallucinatory enemies who were the embodiment of the power of the society, therefore his violence was intended to fight against the power which had ever castrated him, through which he was able to establish his libido as a man and regain his sexual ability. But this violence was against the rule of the society, so his action was treated as a symptom of neurology by the policeman and sent to asylum. "Policeman" also symbolized the power of the society, and Humboldt's violent behavior was eventually subdued by the great power.

3.2 Citrine's Failure in the Romantic Relationship Caused by the Materialization

Castration in the symbolic order is also illuminated in Citrine's failure in his love relationship. The time spent with Naomi was a perpetual happy memory in Citrine's life, which in fact was a metaphor of the imaginary order that the baby feels happy and full when being with mother. "Your mother (Naomi) was beautiful. You'll excuse me for saying this, it's an exciting moment, but I always felt that if I could have braced your mother every night for forty years, as her husband, of course, my life would have been completely fulfilled, a success-instead of this" (Bellow, 1986). According to Lacan, achieving the moment of being one part of his mother is a perpetual desire for human beings and also entails the endless pains for the impossibility to reach it. Living with Naomi brought the sense of fulfillment and joy to Citrine, therefore the moment being with Naomi was like the moment he was with his mother, fulfilling Citrine's hidden desire to reunite with his mother and filling the lack and relieving the horror of fragmentation. But the moment of happiness was eventually broken by the materialistic society which is a metaphor of the symbolic order. Great pains was brought by the fact that Naomi chose to married a pawnbroker who had plenty of money and was able to help her pay the debt, and moreover she was afraid to be a wife of an intellectual who was lost in philosophy and history. Industrial society went opposite with the idealistic pursuit of spirit, so Citrine's addictive to the poem and a spiritual life was contradictory to law of materialized society where pursuing interests was the ultimate end. When Citrine's behavior run counter to the basic system, he would be punished by the society in the form of castration. The fact that Naomi left him was a deflecting form of castration exerted by the power of industry where Citrine's idealism to be a poet was renounced by the realistic society, and he was also rejected by Naomi. And then he was plunged to the abyss and began another journey to find the warmth and safety initially in the imaginary order.

Citrine's second castration is exerted by his ex-wife Denise. His marriage with Denise never brought any happiness and fulfillment to him, because Denise played the role of father who forced Citrine to obey the rule of society. Through Citrine's description, Denise was a vicious woman and her desire for power was as strong as a man. "Very intelligent, she always read up on national and world problems at the beauty parlor. Her nervous intensity is constitutional" (Bellow, 1986). She liked involving herself in the politics. In White house, she discussed the perplexities and disasters of world politics with President. She reproached Citrine's reluctance to enter into the higher class and his weirdness in keep in touch with the freaks like Humboldt which destroyed his future and tainted his reputation. Here the gender of Denise and Citrine was exchanged. Denise's ambition to participate in the world politics was the symbol of man's power in the patriarchal society, and her aggressiveness in pushing Citrine to accept the law of the society and adapt to the requirement of society deprived Citrine of his pursuit of his idealism and manliness. On the contrary, Citrine's withdrawal to the inner world was the character of feminine, in this sense, he was thus castrated by his wife the symbol of the social power. Citrine failed to attain the satisfaction and fulfillment a man needed in his unconsciousness, and the sense of lack and fragmentation was intensified by the tension between Citrine and his wife, so the divorce with Denise was inevitable and was also a way for Citrine to struggle against the castration and win his power as a man back.

But his struggle in refusing to be castrated and endless desire to fulfill the lack is thwarted in his relationship with Renata. Renata was a beautiful and sexy woman. Whenever Citrine thought about her body, he was lost in the exultancy and great passion. "The pleasure of sleeping with her went far beyond the ordinary pleasure of sharing a bed. Even to lie unconscious beside her was a distinct event. Energizing influences passed into my hands from her breasts during the night" (Bellow, 1986). Sleeping with Renata gave Citrine strong sense of happiness by touching the breast which coincided with the baby's satisfaction when he was sucking his mother's breast. Thus, Citrine's addictive to the sexual life is a way for him to return to the imaginary order before he could sense his separation with his mother. Moreover, Renata was able to make Citrine as robust as a young man in his middle ages, in other words Renata helped Citrine gain his manliness. Without any doubt, Citrine found the sense of fulfillment and warmth in sexuality, but the fulfillment and happiness provided by Renata was transient, because Renata at last chose to marry a business man Francis who ironically dealt with funeral business. Lost to a man who dealing the business of funeral was a great insult toward Citrine the winner of Pulitzer Prize, so Citrine was left in despair. Francis was also the metaphor of the materialized society, his triumph over Citrine represented the success of the materialized society and the overwhelming power of the law of economy. Citrine's failure illustrated he was defeated by the power of industry society, which practically castrated him in a symbolic way and thus blocked the way to achieve a full and happy state in the real order. Citrine was left in a desperate state and the victim of industry which functioned in the light of the law of jungle. Just as the theory of Lacan, unconsciousness is the sliding signified under the signifier, the way to reach the state of real order and sense of unitary selfhood is impossible, the lack in our inner heart is an endless desire without the possibility to fill.

4. Conclusion

The world in *Humboldt's Gift* is a symbolic world of Lacan who hold the view that fragmentation and loneliness would accompany man all the time, the endless desire for the external world was a symbolic way for them to get close to the moment of happiness when they were one part of their mother. The industrialism and materialism in the novel is compared to the father who stands for the law of society in Lacan's theory and it is so overwhelming that it continually destroyed the way for Humboldt and Citrine to reach the sense of fulfillment and safety and castrated them by the way of depriving Humboldt of his ability to create and write, and also destroying the harmonious relationship between Citrine and his girls. Humboldt and Citrine suffered from fragmentation and lack resulted from the separation from their mother in the original sense, and they were also the victims of the industrial society which thwarted their efforts in seeking the sense of happiness and fulfilling the lack through external forces and their fate was also the epitome of the human beings in the modern world.

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