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The Apotheosis of Thanatos: Displacement and Assailment in the Fairy Tale *The Poor Boy in the Grave* by the Brothers Grimm

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Abstract: In connection with the pain it brings, death is generally used as a means to depict bereavement and despair. But in the fairy tale *The Poor Boy in the Grave*, the Brothers Grimm have used the idea of repeatedly seeking death to depict the protagonist's hope for a better afterlife. The reason for pain, thus, for the protagonist, is not the fear of death, but simply his very existence in a world where he is tortured beyond measure. The objective of this research is to study the idea of death in *The Poor Boy in the Grave* as the culmination of Thanatos, or negative emotions, in light of Sigmund Freud's concept of 'Death Drive', given in his work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, published in 1920. It also aims to assess the strangulation of hope in the protagonist's psyche, that culminated in his belief about death being the only mode of escape from his trauma. The research methods used in this paper are mainly Textual Analysis and Folklore Studies, in addition to the above-mentioned concept of Freudian Psychoanalysis. The symbolism and archetypes in fairy tales make them a function as portals between the conscious and the unconscious aspects of the mind, in an attempt to study the repressed desires. The relevance of this research lies in the critical analysis of the tale, in terms of psychoanalytic perspectives, along with the cultural dynamics in which it functions, in order to study, through the protagonist's trauma, the ingrained pessimistic emotions of the human mind, in an attempt to further enhance studies concerning the application of fairy tales for psychoanalytic literary criticism.

Key words: Apotheosis, Thanatos, Displacement, Assailment, Fairy Tale

Introduction

"Tiger! Tiger! Burning bright...Did He who made the Lamb make thee?" (Blake 33).

As a philosophy in literature, dualism, in congruence with its nomenclature, has always focused upon the existence of two opposites with a prevalent force holding the balance of scale. Good and Evil, Heaven and Hell, Mind and Body, Consciousness and Unconsciousness, Tiger and Lamb, Innocence and Experience, Love and Hate, Life and Death, are all various aspects covered under the umbrella of cosmological dualism, when studied as connected binaries.

But, for dualism to function smoothly, the balance between the binaries is of utmost importance. It is the disruption of balance that causes pain and trauma to the troubled psyche. Speaking of the psyche, in literary terms, it can be defined as "the totality of elements forming the mind" ("Psyche"), and thus, it includes the conscious as well as unconscious aspects of the mind.

The father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, has stated that "the course taken by mental events is automatically regulated by the pleasure principle" (Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 7). But, at the same time, he has also asserted that the psyche works on the Nirvana principle, meaning that it functions on the ideas of asceticism in tone with the pleasure principle.

Thanatos and Apotheosis

Speaking of duality in the forces of the psyche, let us first attempt to understand the two drives that function as binary psychic instincts in Freudian psychoanalysis. The first one is Eros, or, the life instinct, that “is driven by the desire to create life and establish harmonious connections” (Yusim); and the second one is Thanatos, or, the death drive, that “is an inherent urge towards destruction, chaos, and, ultimately, death” (Yusim). The two are named after the dual figures in Greek mythology representing the same. They function interconnectedly in the psyche, and ““The concurrent or mutually opposing action” of the two fundamental drives (Urtriebe), Eros and Thanatos, are supposed to explain “the phenomena of life” (Gerber). It is important to note that the term Thanatos was not used by Freud himself in his work to describe the Death Drive, but was popularized later by the post-Freudian schools of thought.

Thanatos, or the death drive, is a force that drives life towards death, and it is manifested through conducts that are aggressive or self-destructive. Because, after all, “what do we gain by a long life when it is full of hardship and starved of joys and so wretched that we can only welcome death as our deliverer?” (Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* 37). An individual purposely following the idea of Thanatos will try to cause harm to himself/herself, and will want to undertake activities that have the potential to cause his/her own annihilation.

The word Apotheosis means “the best or most extreme example of something” (“Apotheosis”). So here, apotheosis of Thanatos refers to the ultimate act, or, the culmination of the Death Drive for the individual, i.e., the very act of walking on the path of death, and finally embracing it.

But the question that arises is why would a person want to follow the death instinct? Now, not necessarily, would following the death instinct mean, straightaway putting a complete end to the life force. It can also include attempts to cause self-harm or self-injury. The reasons for such destructive activities can be varied, such as, difficulty to cope with stress, or poor management of emotions, or to punish oneself for misdeeds committed, or to feel a sense of control over one’s own body, or to attempt to substitute physical pain for emotional pain, or to try to communicate one’s depressive suffering to others (“Self-injury/cutting”).

A Thanatotic Study of *The Poor Boy in the Grave*

In this paper, we have attempted to study the fairy tale *The Poor Boy in the Grave* by the Brothers Grimm, in light of the Apotheosis of the psychoanalytic idea of Thanatos, or Death Drive, faced by the protagonist.

The protagonist of this tale is a little orphaned boy, who is placed by the authorities, in the care of a rich farmer and his wife. But the couple mistreats and assaults the poor boy beyond measure. So, the boy is displaced from his home, and faces a series of assailments, or assaults in his new home. He faces an identity crisis due to the said displacement and the assailments, that, coupled with the pain and sorrow inflicted upon him, eventually make him take the ultimate step. One day, the boy, in order to prevent himself from getting more tortured and killed by them, ultimately commits suicide. So, for him, death is not an event of pain or unhappiness, but of redemption from his trauma.

The boy's decision to end his life is not a prompt one. It evolves from a seed to fruit throughout the various struggles he endures in the short journey of his life throughout the tale. So, here, the Thanatos evolves from seed to fruit with each passing instance of torture and injustice endured by the boy. From the very beginning itself, we see that the behaviour of the couple was violent towards the child. "The poor young fellow might do what he liked, he got little to eat, but only so many blows the more" (Grimm 590). Since the child was abused from the very dawn of his life, the ingrained duality, i.e. Eros and Thanatos, failed to bloom in a balance, with Eros being completely curtailed due to the absolutely unfavourable conditions inflicted upon the child. As a result, the child experienced the progression of only one of the drives, i.e. Thanatos, or death drive, throughout the journey of his life.

The little boy was made to work extremely hard, and was often beaten black and blue if an error occurred, albeit no fault of his. Infact, the poor boy tries his best to carry out the tasks allotted to him, but his only faults are hunger and weariness, that cause blunders, that too by chance. In both the instances when the boy is told to keep an eye on the hen and the chickens, they were carried away by a hawk, a situation that was beyond the control of the poor boy. But the rich man tortures the boy for the loss of his poultry, and the punishment gets more and more severe with each episode. The first time he is given "beating that he could not stir for two days" (Grimm 590); in the second instance, the farmer, out of extreme anger, "beat the boy so unmercifully that he was forced to lie in bed for several days" (Grimm 590).

Now, the whole idea of using hunger as a punishment, is based on a traditional belief that God, when angry, uses famine and hunger as a method of punishment or "retribution" (Pérez-Sales 1). In line of this, ever since olden days, hunger has been used as a mode of punishment for children as well, with the intention to discipline them. But, modern medical consultants advise against the use of hunger as a punishment for children. In the words of the Paediatric Haematologist Prof. Edamisan Temiye "it can lead to depression and aggression" (Onwuzoo). However, in this tale, hunger is used not as a measure of punishment, but implicitly as a means of brute torture, with the boy being deprived of food even when he is made to perform extremely tiring tasks. The boy is kept hungry not only when he fails to perform the task, but also when he is in the process of performing it; and the irony is that the boy's failure to successfully complete the task is also due to his hunger and weariness caused by the food deprivation.

Later in the tale, when the child is turned into an errand boy, to deliver, twice, a basket of grapes to a judge, he, out of hunger, eats some of the grapes, for which, the judge, out of concern, tells the farmer that he should provide better care for the boy, give him ample food, and teach him right and wrong. But the farmer takes it the wrong way, and to teach the boy a lesson, he gives him an extremely difficult task, with a warning that he would be beaten once again, that too, more severely than ever, if he failed to complete it within the designated time. His exact words were "if you will eat, you must work, and if you do anything wrong, you shall be quite sufficiently taught by blows" (Grimm 591).

The little boy's task was to cut bundles of straw for the farm horses. He removes his coat, due to the heat, and places it on the bundle of straw. But then, by mistake, the coat too, is chopped

off to shreds along with the straw. The boy is so scared of the consequences of not being able to complete the task on time, that he tries to make haste, and hence, does not notice the coat getting shredded and mixed up with the straw.

With each episode of abuse, the Thanatos in the boy's psyche was Apotheosizing. But, it was this particular episode that was the last straw for the boy's capacity to handle torture and abuse. In order to save himself from the farmer's beatings, he decides to end his life. "“Ah,” cried he, “now all is over for me! The wicked man did not threaten me for nothing; if he comes back and sees what I have done, he will kill me. Rather than that I will take my own life.”” (Grimm 591).

Ironically, when the boy was working his tiny muscles off, the farmer and his wife, along with their servants were off to enjoy the yearly fair. This shows that the boy's status in the house was even worse than a servant. It also shows that even though the farmer had other people who could accomplish the task of cutting the straw for their horses, he made the little boy do it, just to torture him. In addition, the farmer and his wife were not poor people. They were rich enough to be able to restock all the material possessions that were damaged in the various encounters mentioned in the tale. Even so, they torture the little boy for their losses, although the child was not entirely at fault. Instead of telling the child to be more careful, they simply use brute violence upon him. So, here, the boy was adopted by the farmer and his wife, not to provide him with a better life or to relieve themselves from the pangs of childlessness, but simply to make him slog his life off for the couple, and for the couple to inflict all sorts of miseries upon the poor soul. In this sense, the farmer and his wife were themselves torchbearers of an inherent Thanatos, that they passed on to the little boy.

The boy's life at the farm throws light on the terrible conditions that children can be exposed to, when bereft of the love and care that they deserve. It also shows the level of mistreatment the foster parents, irrespective of their financial status, can met out on the child, when they see the child only as a liability instead of an asset, and as a slave instead of a gift. Although in the medieval and early modern era, it was normal for parents to use beatings on their children, in order to discipline them and teach them the value of hard work, it in no way meant that the child should be horribly abused and scarred for life.

Speaking about the size of the family in relation to child abuse, it is generally accepted that the vulnerability of child abuse is directly proportional to the size of the family, since, in larger families, parents do find the time to cater much to each and every child (Reena, a393). The noteworthy point is that in this tale, unlike other tales involving stepparents and stepchildren, the farm couple did not have any children of their own. The little boy was the sole child in the house, but he was mistreated all the same. It was as if the farm couple knew that the little boy had no alternative other than to bear up their beatings, and continue to live with them despite the torture, since he had nowhere else to go; and they took complete advantage of it by severely thrashing the poor child even at a minute mistake.

Now, the mistreatment meted out upon the child by the farm couple could be due to four possible reasons. First, they deliberately liked to torture the boy and gain pleasure from his pain.

Second, since they themselves were severely beaten by their parents in their childhood, torture was the only method of discipline they knew of, and they did not feel that they were doing anything wrong; in fact, they felt that the boy should be beaten and punished for his own good. Third, they were frustrated by having to keep the boy and provide for him and hence used physical violence on the poor child to cite out their frustrations. Fourth, they did not consider the boy as their adoptive child, but simply as a worker brought in by them to do the farmwork, and thought that they had every right to beat him if he messed up the work allotted to him.

In all the instances where he is abused, the little boy has not once been deliberately insincere in his work. Infact, he tries his best to work efficiently. But, either the circumstances turn beyond his control, or the work itself is so exhausting that his tiny physique is unable to endure. Whatever mistakes happen by him are due to hunger, exhaustion or fear, because along with being constantly beaten, he is also given very scant food to eat, despite the farmer being rich enough to afford it. In addition, he is deliberately given such difficult tasks by the farmer, so as to enable the farmer to thrash him later on, in case of failure.

The forfeiture of food, faced by the child, plays a major role in his Thanatotic progress. Food is a symbol of life itself, and its deprivation represents, in a way, the suction of the life force, or Eros, from the child, and the gradual growth of the death drive, i.e., the steady apotheosis of Thanatos. Along with the savagery of violence, the pain of hunger paves the pathway for the boy towards seeking alternative reliefs from his woes. Hunger here, actually acts as a catalyst in the boy's progression towards his own death.

Children facing abuse in foster homes “might not define it as abuse, they might be scared to tell a trusted adult, they might blame themselves for being abused, or they might not know with whom they could talk about their abuse” (Lang 166). Interestingly, here too, it is not mentioned whether the authorities who placed the boy under the care of the farmer and his wife, were aware of the abuse or not. But it is the authorities who had entrusted him to the couple, i.e., they were, in a way, responsible for putting the child in this hellish condition. In addition, it is also unclear as to whether or not they inspected the boy's condition regularly. This led the boy to believe that there was no authoritative person with whom he could share his troubles, or get the abusers punished, thereby furthering his ideas about putting an end to his own life in an attempt to relieve himself from his trauma.

But, there is also an alternate viewpoint to this situation involving the authorities; that in fact, the actual domestic conditions of life in foster families, are not known clearly to the authorities. They genuinely consider the adoptive parents to be good people, thus negating their need for constant interventions in their lives. In this story too, the authorities were either negligent in their duties, or they were kept in the dark regarding the actual living conditions on the farm for the little boy, with the farmer and his wife acting as two faced creatures to keep the authorities from taking the boy, i.e., their source of unpaid labour, away from them.

Such situations involving parents and children are tricky for the authorities as well, and so, on the part of the authorities, “excessive intervention in family life as well as gross failure to intervene” (Franjić 3) can both have tragic outcomes.

Here, the boy's journey towards Thanatos has a great deal to do with the loss of his own parents and the subsequent presence of the foster parents. In fairy tales, the loss of a parent by the protagonist[s], and the subsequent replacement by the stepparent, refers to the movement of the psychic energy in the child's mind, from the conscious to the unconscious, i.e., "the prevailing conscious attitude relating to logos or eros has become lost or receded; its energy has moved into the unconscious, where it activates a replacing figure that is usually negative" (Franz, *Archetypal Patterns* 128).

But in this tale, since the boy was orphaned at his very birth itself, he has never experienced the positively radiant parental love. In this sense, Eros, or the life force has never fully developed in his psyche. The abusive adoptive parents are the only parents he has ever known, and so, when the boy's psyche attempts to replace the already negative parents with another more negative figure, it can only think of the ultimate force commonly associated with negativity, i.e., death. It is for this reason that the boy prefers to put an end to his life instead of just walking away from the abusive environment in the hope of a better future. He feels that there is no place for him in any corner of this world, and hence, he wishes to leave this world altogether, in the hope of a better afterlife.

As per the Freudian Family Romances, the neglected or abused child in a familial setup, distances himself mentally from the family. He imagines himself to be the child of another set of parents who are much better, in terms of their nature as well as their social standing, than the original parents, and who treat him with the love and care that he deserves. (Freud, *Family Romances* 237).

But fairy tales are an inverted reality, and hence what appears as a mental distance in the real world, manifests as a physical distance in the fairy tale, with the child protagonist in the tale either being sent away from home, or being abandoned, or ultimately being killed. But here, in this tale, the little boy is already placed under a set of parents, different than his own, and so, instead of imagining himself to belong to a new set of parents, he feels it is more appropriate to entrust himself to the care of the ultimate truth of life itself, i.e., death.

The method chosen by the boy to engage in the culmination of his Thanatos is also interesting. He hopes for a Deus ex Machina to save him from his torment. He first eats honey from a pot kept hidden by the farmer's wife, thinking it to be poison. But when he feels stronger instead of getting weaker, he immediately, goes on to drink wine from a bottle belonging to the farmer, once again mistaking it for poison. "This death tastes sweet too" (Grimm 592). The boy was firmly resolved to end his life, which is why he went on to pursue the second suicide attempt after the first one was unsuccessful.

Now, death of a child due to poison used by, or belonging to, a parent, is not unique to this tale. On famous story wherein the child is poisoned by a parental entity is *Little Snow White*, wherein the stepmother, i.e., the evil queen feeds a poisoned apple to princess Snow White. In other tales such as *Hansel and Gretel* and *The Juniper Tree* too, the child / children are brutally killed or attempted to be killed by the step parent. But what sets this tale, i.e., *The Poor Boy in the Grave* apart, is that, here, the parents do not want to kill the boy, but simply want to torture the

hell out of him. Here, the boy himself wants to use his parent's belonging to poison his own self to death, in order to completely sever the bonds of parental relations. To the boy, the poison is not in fact poison, but the antidote to the Thanatotic venom of life that he is constantly enduring by having to stay with the farmer and his wife, i.e., his adoptive parents.

Later, due to the effect of the wine, the boy, overcome with the desire to embrace death, feels that he must go and find a grave for himself. He finds a grave in the backyard of a church, and lies in it. There is music playing at a nearby wedding, and he feels that it is the music of Heaven. The boy lies there thinking that he has already given up his life and entered Heaven. He never wakes up again; "the heat of the strong wine and the cold night-dew deprived him of life, and he remained in the grave in which he had laid himself" (Grimm 592).

Apparently, it looks as if the boy fell into the grave and died, but upon a deeper analysis it can be understood that the physical grave was but a mere metaphor of the boy's entire life. The boy's struggles were enough for the Thanatos in his psyche to escalate to the point of culmination in his death, that he felt appropriate to bring it upon himself. Wine is normally consumed in cold climates in order to keep the body warm by balancing the effects of the cold weather. But the boy is not able to survive the cold even after consuming the wine. This signifies that the power of cold was too much even for the wine to handle; i.e., the boy had mentally accepted death already, and the Thanatos had already apotheosized and long surpassed the Eros on the psychic plane. The cold weather that took the boy's life is simply a symbol of the cold heartedness of the farmer and his wife, who deprived the poor boy of the warmth of parental love and affection.

The law of Karma plays its part too in the tale, but only after the boy's death. The farmer, terrified at the thought of justice being served to them for their ill treatment of the boy, collapses due to stress, and his wife accidentally starts the fire by dropping a pan of fat into the hearth while rushing to aid him. Hence, they lose their house, and are forced to spend the rest of their days "in poverty and misery, tormented by the pangs of conscience" (Grimm 592). The point to be noted here is that initially, the couple is upset not due to the death of the child, but just due to the fear of being punished for driving the child down the suicidal path. They have no remorse for the trauma and sorrow they inflicted upon the poor boy. It is only after they lose their property and have to bear the pain of poverty that they realize their misdeeds.

Prior to the modern times, there were different obligatory responsibilities, upon the foster parents and foster children. Although emotional reasons for the system of foster care did prevail, there were cases wherein orphanages literally auctioned the orphaned children to the lowest bidding foster parents. The foster parents were just expected to provide food, clothing and Christian instructions to the foster children. But the foster children had to obey the foster parents and "perform such labor as could be expected" (Persson 64). Due to the prevalent patriarchal codes of conduct, the relationship between the foster children and the foster parents, thus, was that of master and servant, in accordance with the then prevailing laws of bonded labour. In addition, in cases of physical or sexual abuse, the child was simply transferred to a different set of parents. Ironically, in the tale, the farmer and his wife fail to fulfil one of the very basic obligations, i.e.,

the provision of food, to the poor boy, by torturing him to the point of starvation, in addition to the physical violence done to the child. The child ultimately transfers himself into the hands of death.

The scenario of child abuse and neglect has unfortunately, not passed away with the bygone eras. Although now, foster children are not considered as labourers, they are still abused nonetheless. Infact, not just foster children, but children per se, all over the world, endure domestic abuse in some form or the other even today.

As per a study conducted by UNICEF in 2024, “Nearly 400 million children under 5 — or 6 in 10 children within that age group globally — regularly endure psychological aggression or physical punishment at home, according to new UNICEF estimates. Of them, around 330 million are punished by physical means” (“Nearly 400 million”). Additionally, according to the World Health Organization, “international studies reveal that 6 in 10 children under 5 years of age regularly suffer physical punishment and/or psychological violence at the hands of parents and caregivers” (“Child maltreatment”).

A home should be a place where a child feels loved and valued, and is not considered as a burden. So, it is not prudent to overlook the instances of child abuse as simply misfortunate events of a distant past, but to address them in search for ways to make the world a better and happier place for children all over the globe.

Conclusion

To conclude, the poor boy in this tale fits into the archetype of the innocent and the abused. His fate is a reminder of the powerlessness of children and the callousness of those in charge of their lives. The story extends into a study of emotional responses, as it delves into common feelings of empathy and a desire for justice, by compelling the reader to think upon the emotional burden of the boy’s pain and sorrow, that ultimately culminates in his death. The tale, in its entirety, contains elements of fear, violence and torture. It also conveys an earnest appeal for ethical sense and compassion, while allegorically bringing to light issues of abuse and injustice in a world where children can face the greatest threats from the very people entrusted with their care.

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