

True History of the Kelly Gang: A Psychoanalytic Reading

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts a psychoanalytic reading of Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2001) and particularly the ways in which Ned Kelly engages with social relations. How does he subscribe to the establishment of Australian society? Ned's relationship with his mother and his revolt against power construction has been studied in the light of psychoanalytic theory. It argues that the traces of primeval selfhood are repressed and in some ways are transformed. The power serves to keep under control and deform the self. In investigating these challenges, this article relies upon Freud's cultural diagnosis. In the mean time, Erich Fromm's ideas of social structures will enrich this paper. This study is hoped to familiarize the reader with Peter Carey as a modern novelist who radically challenges our evaluations of selfhood.

KEYWORDS: self, the Oedipus complex, pleasure principle, reality principle, return of the repressed desire, acquiring selfhood

1. INTRODUCTION

There has been an enormous debate about making of the self, public context in which selfhood is constituted in the twentieth century. Theorists of the twentieth century have revitalized the psychical actions that associate selfhood and culture. Among those who attempted this idea is Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis. During his studies he expressed key perceptions of contemporary social and political realities. He considered complicated model of personal desire in connection with social forces and most significantly what the individual loses in deference to oppressive social force.

From Freud's view point, the self, or 'ego' is acquired through the relationship and excitable observation of fact and events specifically those observations in early childhood. The Social condition in modern time is under the influence of variety of forces and occurrences. Among those forces, the interaction of love and hatred, the fundamental tension underlying man and civilization particularly the pleasure principle and the reality principle in the development of the selfhood are important. It is in this domain that ending a relationship always brings a substantial pain and loss.

Freud in 'Studies in Hysteria' (1893-5) which was an outcome of collaboration with Josef Breuer considered patient's depression as a result of strong identification with parent. From Freud's view point, in our passionate devotion to others especially father or mother and intense sexual relationship the fact of transference is an influential element of individual experience. Freud relates the idea of the self in connection with human sexuality. He finds the roots of desire in early cordial relationship between the infant and his mother. In those early days human child is totally dependent on the others. Consequently, relationship with other is significant to the formation of his subjectivity. In this time, child's demands are totally under the influence of pleasure principle. It is a time when the child seeks for a special kind of pleasure. Freud says, "The baby's obstinate persistence in sucking gives evidence at an early stage of a need for satisfaction which, though it originates from and is instigated by the taking of nourishment and for the reason may and should be termed *sexual*. (Freud, 'An Outline of Psycho-Analysis,' SE, XXIII, p. 154). In normal progression the instinct is constrained by experience. It is based on this experience that the primeval pleasure seeking is resolved. Freud remarks:

In this way one makes the first step towards the introduction of the reality principle which is to dominate future development. This differentiation, of course, serves the practical purpose of enabling one to defend oneself against sensations of unpleasure which one actually feels or with which one is threatened. In order to fend off certain unpleasurable excitations arising from within, the ego can use no other methods than those which it uses against unpleasure coming from without, and this is the starting-point of important pathological disturbances. (1985, 255)

Freud's study of the role of society in forming of the subjectivity is important. It deals with some of the most agonizing demeanors of human record and monumental ambivalence structures the relation between society and the

self. He believes the complexity of social life is constituted from permanent dualism. Society treats its members unfairly. Severe repression leads to fires hostility and protest. This part of Freudian idea is developed and scrutinized in the social investigation done by Erich Fromm.

Dr. Fromm attempts the ways in which society influences and forms selfhood. Antony Elliott says:

The social system, in Fromm's reinterpretation of Freud, constitutes the identity of human subjects to fit the economic, cultural and historical context. Feudal society produces subjects adapted to the roles of serfs and lords; market capitalism produces subjects and capitalists and workers; and twentieth-century monopoly capitalism churns out subjects as consumers. (47)

The role of family in the studies of Fromm is prominent. Receiving paternal love requires negation of subjectivity. In one point he asserts, "The family is the medium through which the society or the social class stamps its specific structure on the child, and hence on the adult. *The family is the psychological agency of society*" (483). Fromm emphasizes that ascendancy over the inner life and producing regressive morals are some consequences of the world of capitalism. Fromm in his influential work *The Sane Society* (1956) discusses that contemporary society damages human relationship and the best way for understanding selfhood is the study of interpersonal affairs. The society is responsible for providing conditions in which the process of self-organization takes place comfortably. In the other word, society is responsible for the availability of socio-economic chances for all its members. Based on the relationship of each individual to his society he makes a choice between progressive or regressive attitude towards the world around himself. In progressive type, the relationship is based on the mutual understanding and isolation is treated constructively. In regressive relations with subjects their seclusion is rejected or denied. Elliott remarks:

In this mode of functioning, inner pain and emptiness are side stepped by a neurotic immersion in infantile illusions. An endless menu of regressive fantasies is offered by mass consumer culture in this connection, fantasies which produce narcissistic pathology and related disturbances. The key feature in this neurotic unfolding of the self is that other people are used instrumentally in order to bolster self-identity, and thus to avoid inner emptiness and isolation. (49)

It shows that issues of self-have their basis in prevailing method of social dominance. In view of the fact that political, economical, and cultural realms are all aimed to satisfy sadistic demands of government. Therefore, regressive way of life is chosen by individuals. Based on Freud's coined term 'return of the repressed,' these unconscious thought would proceed to obtain to the fictions of the mind in order to be discharged.

Carey's *True History of the Kelly gang* deals with motives, especially hidden or disguised motives. Therefore, it affords an occasion to be examined from the above mentioned theoretical framework. It is one of his well-received novels in which he re-tells the life of Edward (Ned) Kelly. It won the 2001 Booker Prize. Carey presents the story as a series of letters written by Ned to his daughter. Ned is one of the iconic figures of Australian culture and Carey's novel gives an impressive view on Kelly's life and social condition in which he spent his life. One of the most remarkable achievements of the book is the language, written in highly ungrammatical and colloquial style. It is distinguished by a specific lack of punctuation. Carey takes the reader from Ned's childhood and teenage years in prisons to his horse stealing and bank robbing. The novel is narrated in first-person. In an interview with Andreas Gail, Carey expresses, "Setting out to write *True History*, I wanted to make something really beautiful, something that had never existed in the world before, with sentences that had grown out of our soil even though they had never been written or even though before. And, of course, I wanted to look at the past, not to escape, but to illuminate our present" (2005, 4). The book contains many letters written by Ned to his daughter. Ned wrote these letters, because he didn't want his daughter to believe the lies from the authorities and the media. Ned, the eldest of eight Children, was born in Victoria. His own father was an Irish convict, shipped along with his mother to Australia during the Great Transportation. He worked very hard to start a new life in Australia. But the quality land was in the hand of few numbers of people. He married Ellen Quinn. When Ned was twelve years old his father died.

Carey's vision of Kelly is that of a misunderstood fighter. Ned is turned to current situation only by circumstances beyond his control. He is portrayed as a sincere and celebrated man, supported by the communities. Ned himself is distressingly conscious of his future. He knows fully what that means to be a man with no cultural remembrance, purposeless and left without any meaningful life.

DISCUSSION

a. Individual Quest for Desire

Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* spreads out a psychoanalytic reading of the novel. It depicts crucial concepts of self, the Oedipus, personality and character. It depicts an interesting model of human subjectivity

and concerns with the motives underlying human behavior. We can follow Ned's journey from infancy to resolve Oedipus complex. We see him at the age of three when he is accompanying his mother at the Beverage Police Camp. He is introduced to us as an emergent subject. It is exactly at this early stage of acquiring subjectivity that we can see a close connection between mother and child which later on his life results in his relentless confusion concerning who he is and what he does. This warm relationship is strengthened by the Oedipal situation, and thus Ned accepts his mother's desires and standards without doubt. He is presented as implementing his ideas and seeks for his real identity and comes under the authority of the government which is symbol of the *name of the father*. From Lacan's view point although the name-of-the-father allows one to become a subject, it controls that subject through the Law. Each of these steps clearly exemplifies the process of the forming of subjectivity.

For Ned, a sense of selfhood emerges in the structures that associate his self-reflexivity and desire, reason and emotion. It is in these domains that Carey affords the ideal of a search for the infant. A foreshadowing of this search takes place in the information we acquire from Ned's remembrance of his childhood. He says "I had long thought myself to be deaf to my parents' private business but after digging up that trunk I would stay awake at night listening to my mother and my father talking" (22). It clearly depicts breaking of his resolute passivity to reply to the sound of his father's voice. Ned's indication adumbrates the aim and end of the infant's constitutive relation to ego, mother and the society represented in a place from which Red (John) Kelly speaks. He starts his life with an immense love for the mother. As a matter of fact, for all of us the situation is to some extent the same. We experience a deep anxiety in case of separation from her. Thus, it is very crucial to understand this relationship because we start life within it and live our lives through it. The portrait of Ned's self or his "ego" becomes clear to us through his interpersonal relationships and intensive emotional adventures, specifically those in early infancy and childhood. Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* reflects unquestionable aspects of the ambivalence of love and revenge. Carey is obsessed with the theme of rebellion and the aggressive conduct towards the father figure. Rebellion is a refusal of the law of the father. Freud called this concept 'primal horde.' From his view point, in the earlier gathering a primal father prohibited his sons from making a sexual relationship with the female people in the family. Later on for the purpose of gaining power, those sons killed their father. Freud remarks:

Totemic religion arose from the filial sense of guilt, in an attempt to allay that feeling and to appease the father by deferred obedience to him. All later religions are seen to be attempts at solving the same problem. They vary according to the stage of civilization at which they arise and according to the methods which they adopt; but all have the same end in view and are reactions to the same great event with which civilization began and which, since it occurred, has not allowed mankind a moment's rest. (1913, 168)

Freud believes the boy's unconscious attempt to have loving relationship with his mother is only because of Oedipus complex. In this novel, the protagonist, Ned, suffers from this Freudian concept. There is ample evidence, in fact, that Ned in early childhood enjoyed a warm relationship with his mother. As demanding as his mother was, Ned attempted to win her love in many ways, even in his rejection of accompanying Mary to America, the one whom he recognized as his mother's rival. The main focus of the story is Kelly's relationship with his mother. Ned struggles to be good, but his mother, a selfish mother, apprentices him to a stage coach thief. With Harry Power he learns the first lessons of a corrupt society, robbing, intimidating and hiding in the outback. The dependence of Ned's desire on his mother is the lasting aspect of Ned's revolt. Ned's resentment against his step fathers grows in him day by day. The novel depicts the sturdy effect of a strong government on its people. Australian government, that is the primal father, persecutes the whole family. The society is cruel, severe and incapable of making any sensible relation with its own common individuals. The law is partial to extremism and segregation. Ned and lots of other people are repelled by this social system. This government and Irish minority do not have any sensible relationship. The society agonize its own minorities. These people are irritated because of the treatment of their law.

Ellen has many lovers. Carey makes use of the mother archetype to scrutinize Ned's personality. Ned's internal anxiety is a prominent aspect of Carey's novel. For understanding Ned's personality the attention must be paid to his cordial attachment to his mother. The major reason of Ned's plight can be sought in his emotional and arduous search for a mother figure. The novel in its characterization of Ned shows an inner anxiety between psychological desire of a woman and inner subjectivity. Carey investigates the conflict in Ned's character. The root of this conflict goes back to his infancy. Ned's struggle is a sign of a strong predilection for an ardent relationship. Ned narrates his childhood memories of his mother and father. There is an affectionate attitude towards the mother and in contrast with that a severe abhorrence towards his step fathers. It is this abhorrence of his step father that leads him to search for sexual relationship in Mary. She is the only woman with whom Ned makes contact. Mary has a significant role in the growth of his masculinity. Ned's isolated self is the result of a lack of a strong father's love. Ned always carries the everlasting image of his mother. Mary is the symbol of both maternal and sexual love. Ned's relationship with Mary illustrates his movement from the lack he recognizes to a desire to fulfill again. Mary has the same

qualities as Ned's mother to some extent, particularly; her enfolding love and devouring spiritual possessiveness of Ned. Even in his first sexual intercourse, Ned treats Mary the way a baby treats its mother. Their sexual union takes place in an atmosphere of passion, incest and Oedipal desire:

Then we was playing what they call THE GAME you never knew so many hooks and buttons and sweet smelling things we took them off her one by one until she lay across her bed there were no sin for so did God make her skin so white her hair as black as night her eyes green and her lips smiling. She were a teacher with a mighty vocation pulling and dragging when I took her she were slender and strong as a deer her breasts small but very full she threw back her head offering her pale throat to me I run her to ground I took her breasts took them in my mouth sucking & suckling I didn't know whose milk I stole but she were crying out and holding my hair it were the best thing that happened to me in my life. (244)

It may be true that Mary initiates him into adulthood. She provides Ned with a measure of self-esteem and a certainty of his own sexual abilities. Carey makes use of the Greek model of incest to depict Ned's unconscious desire for his mother. *True History of the Kelly Gang* is a novel about the power of passions, the explorations of love, and desire.

b. Complex Connections between Self and Society

Working with *True History of the Kelly Gang*, we found that the depiction of individual and society in Australia presents one of the clearest pictures of the problems between the self and the super structure. What we found as we worked with the novel was surprising, all the people men or women are depicted as controlled by the name and law of the father. The fundamental anxiety between man and civilization as a whole and Ned and the society specifically is the pleasure principle versus reality principle. Ned is a very benevolent person and a man of the family. In the story, born into a large family of Irish immigrants, Ned should have lived a life of happy and peaceful. But his good nature isn't enough to spare him from the assaults of society's injustice. At school, he endures a barrage of dispiriting prejudice. The police harass his family relentlessly. Ned is a quiet family man who finds himself an outlaw mainly by a series of mistakes, poor circumstances, bad luck, and twisted police characters. The police's prejudice and ambition serve to goad Kelly into following a path not of his own choosing. This slave and master's ideology forcefully denied selfhood to those it subjected. In the meantime, the slave master is indicative of the primal father, the owner of the Name. We can single out number of themes throughout the novel. All of these themes are related to Australian individual identity; imprisonment, exploitation. All of the people are depicted as suppressed and restricted by the dominant ideology as it may be called law of the father. Kelly gangs run up against the boundaries of this hegemony, underscoring their inability to find any space outside the ideology that defines them. As a matter of fact, Ned as a subject recognizes the artificial nature of the limits of this ideology. He tries to threaten the existence of the said ideology. Freud's social theory discusses some of the painful experiences of human being. From his view point our society is very oppressive. Society imposes lots of demands on its own subjects. From Freud's point of view, too much restrictions leads to severe aggression and malice. In such a kind of situation a society must use pleasure principle in the service of reality principle. But as depicted in the novel, the society robs its own individuals of their instinctual enjoyment. In the real sense, Ned had been driven by necessity to killing. Certainly this shows an instance of disappointment and agony. In this condition, individuals need some palliative measures. These measures help people like Ned to reduce their misery. But the society never creates such initiatives in the novel. When the society's restriction is beyond control, cultural life is denounced to self-annihilation. As a whole from Freud's view point, the society relays upon the repressed of aggression which is the sole result of Oedipus complex. From Fromm's point of view "society is our escape from freedom." It means that the social identity of a person is acquired through his relationship with the society. In the other words, it is the same power of law or law of the father and in the case of Ned Australian society that influence and shape Ned's selfhood. So he is the sole product of the society of his own time. Ned's society requires him to adopt himself to the rules of those in charge of the same society. Fromm believes that this kind of so-called subjectivity is nothing more than the production of "socially necessary character types. "This type of subjectivity is only an aspect of the other's desire. In this respect, Lacan's conception of the unconscious as "the discourse of the other" (Ecrits 285) also corresponds to the idea of Fromm which says, "wanting to act as they have to act." In this complex the role of family is also very prominent in the birth of repression. Acquiring the approval of the power is subject to the acceptance of this repression and the refusal of selfhood. Ned has to obey this corrupt power construction to reach his own inner selfhood. His family plays a drastic role in repression. From Fromm's point of view, "The family is the medium through which the society or the social class stamps its specific structure on the child, and hence on the adult. *The family is the psychological agency of society*" (48). As a matter of fact, confusion about identity caused by his parents suffocates his self, obstructing his growth. Whereas desire, for Lacan, is an illusion, a lack that can never be

fulfilled, for Carey's character, desire offers the most real, life-giving depth to being. Despite their differences, the character's unconscious desires are revealed through language, and in Lacan's view, the unconscious is structured like a language. That's the reason why Ned tries to shake off the burdens of traumatic experiences by writing about them. He tries to realign them in art, through conscious and unconscious discourses which are evident in the patterns of his letter to his unseen daughter.

I lost my own father at 12 yr. of age and know what it is to be raised on lies and silences my dear daughter you are presently too young to understand a word I write but this history is for you and will contain no single lie may I burn in Hell if I speak false. (7)

In Ned's time, the society and its structured form individual identity and their relationship. We can get a better glance of Ned's identity through interpersonal relationships. The society of his time never plays a positive role in structuring socio-economic chances for him. So his repressive transformation of this need creates a regressive attempt. Elliot remarks:

The pain of individual isolation must be confronted and accepted, in order for healthy inter subjective relations to develop. By contrast, a regressive involvement with other people is caused by denying individual separateness. In this mode of functioning, inner pain and emptiness are sidestepped by a neurotic immersion in infantile illusions. An endless menu of regressive fantasies is offered by mass consumer culture in this connection, fantasies which produce narcissistic pathology and related disturbances. (49)

The novel clearly depicts the way Irish people are treated by the law of the land. According to Lacanian psychoanalysis, the individual is supposed to come under the authority of the symbolic father who is the inaugurating agent of law in the Oedipal passage. Anyway acceptance of the name-of-the-father is to accept subordination to an order which is grounded in society. Ned's father is a quite man. He is not a man who rebels against the injustice in the society.

Your grandfather were a quiet and secret man he had been ripped from his home in Tipperary and transported to the prisons of Van Diemen's Land I do not know what was done to him he never spoke of it . . . My da had sworn an oath to evermore avoid the attentions of the law so when he saw the streets of Melbourne was crawling with policemen worse than flies he walked 28 mi. to the township of Donnybrook and then or soon thereafter he seen my mother. (7)

Ned's father with such a background never thinks, speaks or rebels against the law. Whatever it may be, he just obeys. He believes leading such a life soothes his pain which is a result of the brutal life that Irish transporters are subject to. Ned's father gradually deteriorates as a husband and father. He not only loses his position in the family life but also the police consider him a criminal.

You are a coward she cried. I blocked my ears and buried my face into my flour sack pillow but she would not give up and neither would my father turn against the law. I wish I had known my parents when they truly loved each other.

You will see in time your grandfather were a man of secrets and what he said and done was different things though for now it is enough to know my mother had one idea about my father and the police the opposite. She thought him Michael Meek. They knew him as a graduate of Van Diemen's Land and a criminal by birth and trade and marriage they was constantly examining the brands on our stock or sifting through our flour for signs of larceny but they never found nothing except mouse manure they must have had a mighty craving for the taste. (10)

Ned's society is unable to create a productive and responsive selfhood. His society should come to terms with individual's loneliness and alienations. Carey's novel clearly depicts isolation and alienation in the society. Ned has been driven by sheer necessity to the aggression. It shows an extent of his severe pain and disappointment. Ned's society must first attach to the reality principle to provide a reliable ground for its own individual to acquire selfhood. Carey's novel depicts the exercise of primitive instincts, those instincts that are grounded in the pleasure principle.

CONCLUSION

What Carey wants us to see through his novel is the truth that Ned's society ceased to hear. The truth of this story is the one which is composed in Jerilderie letter by Ned. The principal aim of an individual is to gain pleasure. If a society represses that, he will try to attain it by any means. The stress and restriction between the pleasure principle and the reality principle are very intense and powerful. When we see Ned at the end of the novel, he is on the edge of demise.

Preceded by the crucifix, which was held up before him by the officiating priests, Kelly was then led onto the platform. He had not been shaved or cropped, but was in prison clothes. He seemed calm and collected, but paler than usual, although this effect might have been produced by the white cap placed over his head, but not yet drawn down over his face. As he stepped on the drop, he remarked in a low tone, "Such is life." (421)

He breaks away from the society, its regulations, and biased systems and plunges into the womb-like interior of the land to embrace the pleasure principle. His aggressiveness towards the police men is only a return of the repressed. His desperate attempts to write Jerilderie letter can be interpreted as an event of spiritual and psychological struggle. An event which obviously manifests his mental condition at the moment of his death is his last words of "such is life" (421). Ned by nature was a good man. The point is that he reduced to his natural primitive instincts only by sheer circumstances. Anyway, Carey's novel shows that the society in which Ned lived along with its policemen can be seen as an instrument of callous reality.

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