THE MAIN CHARACTER’S “ANXIETY” AS SEEN IN AMBAROSE BIERCE’S

AN OCCURRENCE AT OWL CREEK BRIDGE

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Abstract

In this paper, the writer describes about Fahquhar as the main character of the story. He is the plantation owner who will be hung by the Federal Scout. The main character is pictured in An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge written by Ambarose Bierce. The paper has two purposes: (1) to analyze the anxieties of the main character and (2) to describe the types of defense mechanism. In analyzing the short story, the writer applied Sigmund Freud’s theory of Psychoanalysis which emphasizes on defense mechanism. The writer also used the technique of close reading that helps the writer to read the whole story several times and to understand the contents of the story. The results showed that how the main character protects himself against anxiety by using defense mechanism. The story showed that the anxiety emerges in the forms of realistic and neurotic anxieties because he worries about the death of executions on the gallows. This is considered as realistic anxiety. He is captured by the guards at the Owl Bridge. The soldiers are ordered to hang him in the footing or altar which is considered as the neurotic anxiety. To protect himself against the realistic and neurotic anxieties, the main character uses denial reality, fantasy and sublimation as the self defense mechanism.

Key words: anxiety, denial reality, fantasy, defense mechanism

Introduction

Freud stated in Bressler (1999: 148), method of interpretation of works of literature to know those engage in psychoanalytic criticism. It is supposed to mean that psychoanalytic literary criticism is a form of literary critic which uses some of the techniques of psychoanalysis in the psychoanalytic critic might focus on the analysis of main characters.

In accordance with (Geurin1999) Freud states “the character’s behaviour can be classified into three zones the Id, Ego, and Superego. The Id is the reservoir of libido dominated by pleasure principle. The Ego is the rational governing agent of the psyche governed by the reality principle. The Superego is the last component of personality as the moral censoring agency, the repository of conscience and pride.”

As above mentioned Id is one of the elements of human psyche and is functioned as the main energy in the form of unconscious part of the mind or the reservoir of a libido. Ego can be determined by experience and reality, therefore, it is guided by reality principle. Id can be realized in the form of anxiety. Anxiety is an unpleasant inner state that
people seek to avoid. The anxiety is solved by someone who experiences it by what is called defense mechanism. Defense mechanism is a way to save the ego against the anxiety. Furthermore, when somebody’s ego is threatened, he will try to save the ego through the defense mechanism process. For example, when the Id impulses, the desire to have sexual relations with a stranger has the conflict with the superego, example belief in societal conventions of not having sex with unknown persons, unsatisfied feelings of anxiety come to the surface. To reduce these negative feeling, the ego might use defence mechanisms conscious or unconscious control of the id impulses. (Godson, 2006).

The short story of *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* focuses on the defense mechanism which is found to the main character. The main character is Farquhar. His dream is to become the hero of the war to the confederacy. But, because of his ambition, he has done the mistake that turns him into a failure. He tries to sabotage the Owl Bridge. The sabotage he does have already known by the Northern people. All of his plans to be the hero have been cancelled by the Northern people.

Once everyone has recognized his plan to sabotage the bridge, he is arrested and taken to the bridge. He is hung with the rope around his neck. Hands are tied on back, he stands at the gallows, and he is seen by the people. There is nothing awaiting him but only the death. The death penalty is all he is waiting.

The main character creates the fantasies of how to escape out of the gallows, the way to survive in the jungle, finding a way to run away from the soldiers, and imagining his rendezvous with his lovely wife. These kinds of fantasies are formed by Farquhar’s mind to shelter his fear and they are also the facts that Farquhar has created the defense mechanism. He has glossed over the reality of the death penalty. The defense mechanism makes the main character feeling calm and brave to face the reality to the last minute in his life in order to avoid dealing directly with frightening and threatening. That is why the denial reality is derived from fantasy.

This paper is about the defense mechanism which is related to the anxiety. The anxiety that Farquhar has is the result of the defense mechanism he implements to avoid the thoughts of the death. His first ambition wanted to be the hero of war, but, the failure he made has threatened his life. With the helpings of fantasy and thoughts
he wants to shelter his fear, pain, and anxiety by making defense mechanism. In this paper, the writer wants to explain the reality, fantasy, and sublimation faced by Farquhar.

The writer focuses the analysis on defense mechanism. Sigmund Freud describes how the ego uses a range of mechanism to handle the conflict between id, and superego. The writer limits the problems in this research. The writer finds three types of defense mechanism that the writer has explained based on Freud’s theory. The types are the fantasy, denial of reality and sublimation.

**Research Methodology**

The first step to collect the data is by reading. The writing uses the technique of close-reading. This technique is a typical reading with the high focus and concentration. Jacobus comes with his definition of a close-reading. Jacobus says that close reading technique is the technique of reading in the form of writing, discussion or silent observation. Jacobus also adds that it should be based on questioning the text.

The steps how to implement the technique of close-reading to the writer’s research is, first, the writer chooses the short story which the writer presupposes the main character has anxiety. Second, the writer wants to find out the main character defense mechanism.

In analyzing data in this research, the writer sorts the texts which related to the main character’s anxiety. The writer finds the texts consisting of the types of defense mechanism inside the main character’s mind. Data are presented is by using words. The writer does not use chart or table to present the data. The data in this research forms of quotation of the main character’s thoughts or fantasies.

**Analysis and Finding**

After analyzing the data, the writer finds the main character’s anxiety as seen in *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* by Ambaroce Bierce. The main character, Fahquhar has the problem of anxiety. He has the anxiety in the form of reality and neurotic anxiety. The anxiety is the unconsciousness of id which imposes the main character. In the story, it is found that the main character does defence mechanism against ‘id’ (anxiety) in the form of denial reality, fantasy and sublimation.

**Realistic Anxiety**

Realistic anxiety is the feeling that one is threatened that has a clear source. This anxiety is caused by the real dangers in the external world. For example if I throw you into a pit of poisonous snakes,
you might experience realistic anxiety. Realistic is which you and I would call fear. (Boore, 2009)

Based on the anxiety concept, the writer sees that the main character, Farquhar is in the situation in realistic anxiety when his fear is caused by the external world, that is a fear to be hung by the Northern soldier. His real condition is on the gallows causes him to be anxious. He is very afraid of death.

The fear emerges because he worries about the death executions on the gallows. As he stands on a plank with a noose around his neck, his imagination takes him on a journey of escaping his destiny of death. It can be seen when Fahquhar stands on a plank on a railroad bridge Northern Alabama. A noose is around his neck. Twenty feet below him is the swift water of owl creek. Next to him there are two soldiers, as the executioners. Nearby there is a captain. His thoughts turn to his family in his final moments.

He closed his eyes in order to fix last thoughts upon his wife and children. The water, touched to gold by the early sun, the brooding mists under the banks at some distance down the stream, the fort, the soldiers, the piece of drift - all had distracted him (3).

Before being hung Fahquhar fear he will never see his wife and children again. This is evident when Fahquhar begins to focus “his last thoughts upon his wife and his children”. After the planks he is standing on are drawn way. Fahquhar neck is circled by the rope is the evidence that he is being hung in a footing. The footing can be transformed into another word like altar. He stands on the plank of the railroad.

The anxiety that he feels is fear to be hung. This anxiety makes Fahquhar anxious because he cannot meet again with his family. This fear is caused by a threat of external world that is the gallows on which he is being hung. This fear happens because the main character’s fear of real world event that is being hung. It is known as realistic anxiety psychologically.

**Neurotic Anxiety**

Beside the reality anxiety, it is found that the main character also experiences neurotic anxiety. Neurotic anxiety is the fear that instinct will get out of control and cause the individual to do something for which he will be punished. If you have ever felt like you were about to "lose it," lose control, yours temper, your rationality, or even your mind; you have felt neurotic anxiety. An example would be hitting someone for upsetting you. (Boore, 2009)
This story represents the main character fear of death. Death is the major fear is because of being hung of a bridge. The punishment way is for the little wrong he has done. He is captured by the guards on the bridge and the soldiers are ordered to hang him in the footing or altar. Fahquhar is the man who will be hung. It seems as regimented and prices as the soldier performing the execution and the military code they follow and how the hanging works.

A sentinel at each end of the bridge stood with his rifle in the position known as 'support,' that is to say, vertical in front of the left shoulder, the hammer resting on the forearm thrown straight across the chest – a formal and unnatural position, enforcing an erect carriage of the body. (2)

This quotation shows the condition of the gallows on which Farquhar is being hung. He faces the punishment because of the mistake that he has done. Each tick like a hammer banging reminds him of death knells. “...he feared he would shriek. “What he heard was the ticking of his watch.”(3). The statement depicts implicitly that Farquhar’s blood is rising up and down in scare waiting for the execution of the punishment. In the moments before his death executions, Farquhar feels his emotion. This anxiety is caused by fear of punishment that resulting in punishment for inappropriate behaviour.

In Farquhar’s case, the use of defence mechanism here is to reduce realistic anxiety and neurotic anxieties that appear because the main character cannot face the reality that he will be hung by the Union Scout. These components combine to create an unpleasant feeling that is typically associated with uneasiness, fear, or worry. When anxiety occurs, his mind responds by increasing problem, solving thinking seeking rational way of escaping the situation. To protect himself against the anxiety, Farquhar uses denial reality, fantasy and sublimation as the self defense mechanism.

**Denial Reality**

Denial of reality is included first level of defense mechanism. The psychotic defense. In accordance with Freud, denial reality is a way of someone in refusing to accept external reality because it is too threatening; arguing against an anxiety-provoking stimulus by stating it does not exist; resolution of emotional conflict and reduction of anxiety by refusing to perceive or consciously acknowledge the more unpleasant aspects of external reality. (Valiant 1997).

The main character’s success of forgetting his anxiety of punishment, pain, and death through the fantasy shows that he denies reality that he is on the gallows facing death sentence. He so successfully
ignores the anxious reality that he can exchange his anxiety to be pleasant feeling – escaping from death sentence on the gallows and successfully reaching home. Way of the main character not recognizing the existence of the gallows which threatens him to die is a form of defence mechanism done by the main character. The way in Freud psychological study is called denial reality as psychotic defences. (Vailant, 1997)

He does this by starting into a delusional dream which he escapes death after the weight of his body snaps the hangman rope. Shortly afterward he swims to safety under heavy gun fire and return home to his plantation and wife. He refuses the reality of being on the gallows by fantasying or imagining.

"If I could free my hands," he thought, "I might throw off the noose and spring into the stream. By diving I could evade the bullets and, swimming vigorously, reach the bank, take to the woods and get away home. My home, thank God, is as yet outside their lines; my wife and little ones are still beyond the invader's farthest advance". (3)

At this point, Farquhar creates the possibility of escape even though it is impossible. Farquhar wants a freedom and he is denials of dying creating the fantasy because he is desperate and wants to escape and be able to be home with his family instead of in a mess of a situation that he cannot control. He denies the reality to be hung because of his failure. That is why Farquhar makes fantasy he wishes his both hands could be free.

**Fantasy**

Fantasy is included in the second level of defense mechanisms, the immature defense. These mechanisms lessen distress and anxiety provoked by threatening people or by uncomfortable reality.

Fantasy is one of ways of self-defence mechanism as psychotic defences. Fantasy is activity of imaging things (Oxford Dictionary). People do the fantasy to escape from unpleasant, anxiety – arousing and frustrating event that is by fantasying about what might have been. People who daydream a great deal sometimes find their own creation more appealing than reality and withdraw from active life. Fantasy popularly imagination or daydreaming, the process usually unconscious, whereby repressed wishes are gratified indirectly. (Vailant, 1997)

The main character, Farquhar experiences unpleasant thing. He gets punishment of death sentence on gallows because of planning to burn the bridge. Being on the gallows with the rope circling around his neck, the main character feels anxious. He has fear of the punishment, death and pain. The fear in Freud
psychology is anxiety. To gratify himself against the anxiety, he does fantasy. The main character to be hung on the gallows with the rope around his neck imagines that he can escape from the gallows by jumping down into the river below the gallows. He dives into the river to save himself from the punishment.

The power of thought was restored; he knew that the rope had broken and he had fallen into the stream. There was no additional strangulation; the noose about his neck was already suffocating him and kept the water from his lungs (6).

The statement shows that Farquhar fantasiyng himself to be successful freeing from the death penalty. He thought his body jumping into the stream. Then, his thought is controlled by the wishes and motives to fantasy, in order to fulfil his desire that undiscovered in the reality.

All efforts of the main character’s escaping which are represented above are merely fantasy. It is not a real one; it is only his imagination because in reality the main character never tries to escape from the gallows. As depicted in the following text, the main character dies on the gallows.

As he is about to clasp her he feels a stunning blow upon the back of the neck; a blinding white light blazes all about him with a sound like the shock of a cannon - then all is darkness and silence! Peyton Fahruhar was dead; his body, with a broken neck, swung gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek Bridge. (11)

The fantasy is the main character’s achieve goals and escape unpleasant, anxiety arousing – punishment, death, and pain by fantasizing successful escaping from the gallows that is by jumping down into the river. Although the main character dies on the gallows, his fantasy can gratify himself from the anxiety of being on the gallows. The fantasy is the main character’s self defence mechanism to release from his anxiety.

**Sublimation.**

The last of defense mechanism existed to the main character is sublimation. This kind of defence mechanism helps Farquhar to integrate his conflicting emotions and thoughts. The emotions and thoughts of the incoming death is absolutely high. Farquhar tries to control the emotion so he can be ready to die at anytime. As Freud stated in Vailant, sublimation as mature defences is the transformation of the negative emotion or instinct into positive actions, behaviour, or emotion. Farquhar character experiences defense mechanism of sublimation by removing himself from his current bad situation by thinking on things more
comfortable and known to him, his home and lover.

He closed his eyes in order to fix his last thoughts upon his wife and children. Striking through the thought of his dear ones was sound which he could neither ignore nor understand, a sharp, distinct, metallic percussion like the stroke of a blacksmith’s hammer upon the anvil; it had the same ringing quality. (3).

The quotation stated as sublimation because Fahquhar has the ‘dear ones’. Crossed in his mind about family. Striking through of his dear one. His memories about them is sharpen. He do not understand why the thought of his family so clearly. It seems like a jingle of a blacksmith hammer upon the anvil. Faquhar success escapes from bad situation by thinking his dear ones so He is able to combat the impulse of fear and anxiety. Even when he is almost dead, he tries to imagine his wife and children.

**Conclusion**

The research focuses on the problems of anxiety and defense mechanism of the main character named Fahquhar. The anxiety in this research is divided into two parts which are realistic anxiety and neurotic anxiety. The type of defense mechanism is found into denial reality, fantasy and sublimation.

Related to Fahquhar, his realistic anxiety is created by the hanging penalty. He feels the pain he is getting in. He is anxious that people have blamed him with a small foul he has done. The influence of the fear coming from the physical world that Fahquhar has faced has created his realistic anxiety.

What it can be seen from the neurotic anxiety from the short story is that Fahquhar is having a fear inside himself. The fear of Fahquhar has felt comes from the dead penalty given to him. The fear comes from inside his mind and soul. The fact that Fahquhar is to be hanged has created the fear inside of him. He feels anxious to face his death. The fear that Fahquhar felt is created by him. He cannot walk away from fear since the neurosis fear has circled his mind and soul with the fear of anxious coming from the imagination of the dead.

The last finding is the defense mechanism shown by Fahquhar. The main character background using defense mechanism is to protect him from harmful of threatening situation, such situations might include conflict, intense anxiety, and shame, situation which threaten self esteem and so forth. Farquhar uses defense mechanism as a way to cope with the reality of the situation. Fahrquhar often does not want to face the reality because it is hard for him to face the fact because it might be hurtful. That is the way of that
the main character uses defense mechanism.

Farquhar uses denial of reality as self defense. He uses it when he refuses the reality which happens in his life. He uses denial of reality in order to defense his life from the fantasy to confront the truth and to reduce the anxiety. All the fantasy of Farquhar is to reduce his fear of death. Therefore to overcome his conflict Farquhar seems to use the self defense mechanism to reduce his anxiety. The self defense mechanisms that he uses are denial of reality, fantasy and sublimation. Fantasy uses by Farquhar when he cannot face the reality that he will be hung by the union scout. Farquhar told thing not as it is, but he wants ought to be such as he escapes death after the weight of his body snaps the hang’s man rope. Then he swam to safety under of gunfire and returned into his house. Farquhar use defense mechanism in order to fulfil his desire that undiscovered by the reality. It is to reduce the anxiety because of the problem. Sublimation by removing himself from his bad situation by thinking on things more comfortable situation and known to him, his home and family.

All the findings that the writer has analyzed from the research are about the realistic anxiety, neurotic anxiety and the defense mechanisms including denial of reality, fantasy and sublimation. Fahquhar faced all of them.

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