



Journal of Arts & Humanities

Fear of Death in Gulliver's Travels

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ABSTRACT

Critics pay little attention to fear of death in *Gulliver's Travels*. This paper aims to deal with the issue with Freud's theory. According to Freud, fear of death results in death drive. In *Gulliver's Travels*, the episodes of the Struldbruggs and the Houyhnhnms reveal fear of death. In the episode of Struldbruggs, fear of death is illustrated through fear of abandonment and fear of loss. Fear of abandonment and fear of loss cause the Struldbruggs to long for physical death to end emotional death. In the episode of Houyhnhnms, fear of death is represented by fear of intimacy. Fear of intimacy is expressed in Houyhnhnms' cold attitudes to their friends and their family members.

Keywords: Fear of death, fear of loss, Struldbruggs, Houyhnhnms.

Available Online: 13th August, 2015.

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Critics have argued about Gulliver's obsessions with scatology, yet they pay little attention to his fascination with death, as particularly presented in the episodes of the Struldbruggs and the Houyhnhnms. This paper tries to interpret fear of death in the two above-mentioned episodes with Freudian theory about death.

Lois Tyson, in her "Psychological Criticism", interprets Freud's "death drive" or "thanatos" as follows: the "death drive" results from one's fear of death, fear of one's own death as well as the others' death. Death includes both physical/biological death and psychological/emotional death. "One's intense fear of losing one's life (fear of death) makes living so painful and frightening that one's only escape is death" (25). Here, fear of death can be illustrated in one's fear of loss in general (24-26).

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1.0 Fear of death in the Struldbruggs: Fear of one's own death

Concerning the Struldbruggs, critics have shown various critical interests. For instance, they read the episode as an attack on Gulliver's own foolishness, naïve greed, and personal ambition (Ewald, 1954), as a warning against the avaricious ambition of the "immortal" church (Bloom, 1973), or as an expression of Swift's disgust with the human body (Hinnant, 1987, 67-68). Some critics observe the theme of death. For instance, J. Leeds Barroll "regard the episode of the immortals as a comment on the hideousness of old age" (1958, 43). However, the story can be understood as a reflection of one's terror of personal mortality.

1.01 Fear of abandonment

"First and foremost, for many of us, the thought of our own death keys into our fear of abandonment, our fear of being alone. Death is the ultimate abandonment: no matter how close we are to our loved ones, no matter how important we are in our communities, when we die we die alone" (Tyson, 1999, 24). This indicates that the fear of abandonment or fear of loneliness is a demonstration of one's fear of death.

The Struldbruggs are totally abandoned even from the day when they are born. "They are despised and hated by all Sorts of People: When one of them is born, it is reckoned ominous, and their Birth is recorded very particularly" (Swift, 1991, 214). The final state of the Struldbruggs is suggested—they will be deserted by "all Sorts of People", including their friends and their family members.

Suppose a Struldbrugg had mortal friends who surely would die one day, his mortal friends would forsake him on the day of death. If a Struldbrugg made friends like his own kind, that is to say, made friends with immortals, who eventually "entirely lose their Memories", for instance, "In talking they forget the common Appellation of Things, and the Names of Persons, even of those who are their nearest Friends and Relations" (213), the Struldbrugg would be also forsaken by his immortal friends who even cannot remember his name, leaving alone their friendship no matter how genuine once it was. Therefore, the Struldbrugg cannot have friends. Even worse, he will eventually be abandoned by all his family members.

The Struldbruggs "were not peculiar to any Family, but a mere Effect of Chance; and the Children of the Struldbruggs themselves, were equally mortal with the rest of the People" (207-208). The quality of immortality is not hereditary and the Struldbruggs are mere random productions. Thus, it is rare for a family to have two Struldbruggs (couples are excluded here and will be discussed later). In another word, all the family members of a Struldbrugg are mortals and they will desert him sooner or later.

First, his parents will abandon him by death. Then, "As soon as they have completed the Term of Eighty Years, they are looked on as dead in Law; their Heirs immediately succeed to their Estates, only a small Pittance is reserved for their Support; and the poor ones are maintained at the public Charge" (213). Even during his children's life time they will neglect him. The Struldbrugg has to live on once his own property or on public support. It indicates that the Struldbrugg will not receive any comforts from his children, neither financially nor emotionally. Once again, he is deserted by another family members—his children. Finally, as suggested above, the only chance for the Struldbrugg to get an immortal family member is "to marry one of his own Kind", but "the Marriage is dissolved of Course by the Courtesy of the Kingdom, as soon as the younger of the two comes to Fourscore" (213). Leaving alone a mortal one, even he happens to find an immortal spouse, he will be left alone by law.

In a word, the Struldbrugg will be abandoned by all his friends and families and has to live alone by himself. "The Language of this Country being always upon the Flux, the Struldbruggs of one Age do not understand those of another; neither are they able after two Hundred Years to hold any Conversation

(farther than by a few general Words) with their Neighbors the Mortal; and thus they lye under the Disadvantage living like Foreigners in their own Country” (213-214). After the abandonment by his friends and his families, he is completely isolated from his own countrymen.

1.02 Fear of loss

“Our fear of death is not merely fear of biological death but translates for most of us into fear of loss in general—loss of my mate’s attention, loss of my children’s love, loss of my health, loss of my job, loss of my looks, loss of my money” (Tyson, 1999, 25).

All that once belonged to a Struldbrugg will be lost finally. As the above analysis illustrates loss of spouse, children and money after they are eighty, the other losses are as follows:

Loss of health: “At Ninety they lose their Teeth and Hair; they have at that Age no Distinction of Taste, but eat and drink whatever they can get, without Relish or Appetite. The Disease they were subject to, still continue without increasing or diminishing” (213).

Loss of looks: “They were the most horrifying Sight I ever beheld; and the Women more horrible than the Men. Besides the usual Deformities in extreme old Age, they acquired an additional Ghastliness in Proportion to their Number of Years, which is not to be described” (214).

Loss of job: “After that Period they are held incapable of any Employment of Trust or Profit; they cannot purchase Lands, or take Leases” (213).

Hence, nobody or nothing stays with the Struldbrugg. Everybody abandons him and everything is lost. Desolate, diseased, decayed and distrusted, in such a state, he can only be regarded as a living organism.

1.03 Biological death and emotional death

Someone may argue that the episode simply deals with the hideousness of dotage which longs for death to end. That is to say, it shows no fear of death at all, but longing for death instead. Everybody, including the Struldbruggs wish death could befall on them to put an end to their misery. For instance, “their Envy seems principally directed... the Deaths of the old”, “whenever they see a Funeral, they lament and repine that others are gone to a Harbor of Rest, to which they themselves never can hope to arrive” (212). Gulliver also performs a drastic change in his attitude to the Struldbruggs from rapture to disgust. “my keen Appetite for Perpetuity of Life was much abated. I grew heartily ashamed of the pleasing Visions I had formed; and thought no Tyrant could invent a Death into which I would not run with Pleasure from such a Life” (214). So he writes down the account to “arm our people against the fear of death” (215).

All these are seemingly against the paper’s statement. But why does everyone yearn for death? The Struldbruggs are only alive biologically or physically. Emotionally they have been already dead. That is to say, the Struldbruggs are living demonstrations of death. How miserable or horrible one will be after one’s death one can find exact answers in the Struldbruggs. When one beholds the state of the Struldbruggs, one will comprehend his own state after death. This explains why “all Sorts of People” “hate” them and consider them as “ominous”. What the Struldbruggs symbolize - the death itself is what they fear for themselves.

What makes the Struldbruggs peculiar to the mortals is their biological immortality. This peculiar trait hurls them into a much more miserable condition. The mortals can be dead both physically and emotionally simultaneously, while the Struldbruggs have to experience death while still alive. Thus, only death can stop the miserable situation. The longing for death comes from fear of death. No wonder

after perceiving the true meaning concerning those immortals, Gulliver begins to hail death which can end the sufferings. One's fear of death is clearly illustrated here for no one wants to experience death while living.

The story of Struldbruggs mainly talks about fear of one's own death. In the episode of the Houyhnhnms fear of others' death is the key issue.

2.0 Fear of death in the Houyhnhnms

The critical interests in the Houyhnhnms mainly focus on whether the horses are perfect or not. For instance, Conrad Suits deems the Houyhnhnms as creatures of "the Perfection of Nature" (1986, 237), while James Rembert (1986) argues the Houyhnhnms lack reason. Few critics have shown their interest in the death attitude of the Houyhnhnms. Though Kathleen Williams in the "Animal Rations Capax" (1986) mentions their death attitude, she regards their death attitude as one of the Houyhnhnms' many perfect aspects:

Perhaps most striking of all, they have no fear of death....the Houyhnhnms...regard death as a good because the agitations of life will then give way to repose...The Houyhnhnms carry Stoic indifference even further, and look forward to death no more than they fear it. Rather they accept it as casually as a journey, and call it retiring to their 'First Mother'. This term, with its pagan air, suggests the complete naturalness of death, as of life, to the Houyhnhnms mind (63).

Is it true that the Houyhnhnms have no fear of death? According to Tyson's interpretations of Freud, fear of death can translate into fear of loss, the Houyhnhnms also have fear of loss: loss of their possession and their leading position.

2.01 Fear of loss:

The Houyhnhnms' fear of loss is displayed in their attitude towards the Yahoos and Gulliver. One of the reasons why the Houyhnhnms want to exterminate the Yahoos is that the Yahoos damage their property. "They would privately suck the Teats of the Houyhnhnms Cows; kill and devour their Cats, trample down their Oats and Grass, if they were not continually watched; and commit a Thousand other Extravagancies" (277). When the Yahoos grow too numerous to threaten the Houyhnhnms' state, they "made a general Hunting, and at last inclosed the whole Herd" (277).

The same can be applied to the final exile of Gulliver. To the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver's possession of reason is always a great fascination. Eventually, they fear that Gulliver might threaten their leading position with the employment of his reason. What's more, they fear that he might organize the Yahoos into groups to destroy their property. "That because I had some Rudiments of Reason, added to the natural Pravity of those Animals, it was to be feared, I might be able to seduce them into woody and mountainous Parts of the Country, and bring them in Troops by Night to destroy the Houyhnhnms Cattle" (286-287).

The Houyhnhnms not only have fear of loss—one representation of fear of one's own death, they also have intense fear of others' death. This is mainly expressed in their attitudes to their friends and their family members.

2.02 Fear of other's death: Fear of intimacy

Fear of abandonment also plays a role when we fear the death of others...fear of such a loss(loss of one's families), of such intense psychological pain, is probably the biggest reason why some of us are afraid to get too close to another person, afraid to love deeply. If I can hold something

back, not give my whole self over to the loved one, then I will be better able to bear the loss when the beloved dies. (Tyson, 1999, 25)

In another word, “Fear of death is thus often responsible for fear of intimacy” (Tyson, 1999, 25). The Houyhnhnm reveals great fear of intimacy in his attitude to his friends, his children, and his spouse.

“Friendship and Benevolence are the two principal Virtues among the Houyhnhnms; and these not confined to particular Objects, but universal to the whole Race. For, a Stranger from the remotest Part, is equally treated with the nearest Neighbour, and where-ever he goes, looks upon himself as at home” (273). This can be interpreted as that the Houyhnhnm has no particular friends and every member in the species is his friend. His friendship is equally shared among the whole species and not directed to any particular ones. Therefore, to the Houyhnhnm, the meaning of a friend equals to the meaning of a stranger, so the death of a friend only means the death of a stranger. In this way, the Houyhnhnm can escape the “Grief” caused by his friends’ “Departure” (281).

“They have no Fondness for their Colts or Foles” (273). Why does the Houyhnhnm treat his children so coldly? Such behavior illustrates his deep-down fear of loss of his children. The loss of a child will definitely produce tremendous psychological pain. Though the text gives no explicit evidences of such a case, even Gulliver declares the loss of “one of their Issue (children) by some Casualty... very seldom happens” (274), yet he mentions the same case almost immediately—“a child hath been lost by any Casualty” (275). Here, the contradiction is if the case rarely happens, it is no need to refer to it again. The second reference indicates that the case plays a crucial part in the Houyhnhnm’s life. If the Houyhnhnm lost one of his children, the couple would live together again to produce another one as compensation. If “the Wife is past Breeding, some other Couple bestows on him one of their own Colts” (274). The loss of the child is compensated by another birth or by other couple’s children. If the Houyhnhnm loved his children too deeply, how could others’ child replace their own, or how could the couple “unselfishly” or “willingly” donate their child to others without remorse? Only the reservation of their affection can ensure their escape from the pain created by the loss of a child.

The Houyhnhnm’s attitude to marriage is another demonstration of fear of intimacy. Their marriage is “not upon the Account of Love”, but “merely the Determination of their parents and Friends”. Similar to his attitude to his children, if he loved his spouse too deeply, how could he endure the great pain caused by the death of his spouse? Only in this way, the Houyhnhnm could remain cool and show no grief to his spouse’s departure.

In a word, far from being having no fear of death, the Houyhnhnm’s attitude or treatment to their friends and families reveal their deep-down fear of intimacy which is a direct representation of fear of death.

3.0 Conclusion

According to Freud, one’s death drive results from one’s fear of death. Fear of death includes fear of one’s own death and fear of other’s as well. Fear of death plays a significant part in the episodes of the Struldbruggs and the Houyhnhnms.

Fear of one’s own death is mainly expressed in fear of abandonment and fear of loss. The story of the immortal Struldbruggs reveals their fear of abandonment and fear of loss. They are abandoned by their friends and family members; in addition, they lose property, health and jobs after they are eighties. Thus, in such a horrible situation, they long for physical death to end their emotional death. Their longing for death comes from fear of death.

The story of Houyhnhnms also shows fear of one’s own death. It is mainly expressed in their attitudes

to Yahoos and Gulliver. Their attitudes result from fear of loss of property and loss of leading position. The episode of the Houyhnhnms, on the other hand, reveals fear of other's death. It is represented by fear of intimacy. Houyhnhnms' cold attitudes to both their friends and families illustrate their fear of intimacy.

Acknowledgement

This paper is supported by "The Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities (JB2013085)".

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