

The Blind Owl and The Sound and the Fury

Bahram Meghdadi

University of Tehran, Faculty of Foreign Languages, English Department

e-mail: meghdadi@ut.ac.ir

Abstract

Both *The Sound and The Fury* and *The Blind Owl* share a common theme. The main justification for this thematic analogue is Carl Gustav Jung's theory of "Collective Unconscious", Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of Russian Fairy Tales* and what Claude Lèvi-Strauss tried to find in the system of world literature. By discovering the underlying structure of myth, Lèvi-Strauss demonstrated universal themes in literary discourses. Therefore, similarity of themes between these world masterpieces is unconscious and Hedayat had not studied *The Sound and The Fury*. The author of this paper has conducted a metaphoric analysis of these novels and has come to the conclusion that by combining the suggestion of a literary analogue, aspects of their superficial organizations may be illuminated. Although a love story on the surface level, the deep structure of both novels reveals the lament of both authors for the passage of time and consequently a socio-historic upheaval which totally transforms cultural discourses in their respective societies.

Key Words: Structure, Thematic analogue, Discourse, Symbolism, Agrarian, Industrial.

This paper offers a comparative analysis of two famous novels written in the 20th century; one a Persian novel and the other, an American work of fiction, combining the suggestion of a literary analogue which may illuminate aspects of their superficial organization.

Such an approach may be justified on different grounds. For example, the structure of *The Blind Owl* bears an interesting resemblance to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, that is to say, *The Blind Owl* is Hedayat's vision of hell, purgatory and paradise. But Hedayat reverses the order of Dante's vision.

Another justification for thematic analogues between the two novels is based on Carl Gustav Jung's discovery of the "Collective Unconscious". According to this theory, thematic analogues are natural phenomena to demonstrate the fact that human beings in all periods of history repeated a similar theme in their works.

Approaching the subject from other angles, both Vladimir Propp, the Russian scholar who compared and contrasted Russian folktales in his book, *The Morphology of Russian Fairy Tales* and Claude Lévi-Strauss, were structuralists and believed since the human mind had a similar structure, therefore its productions were similar and consequently this similarity caused all nations and cultures of the world to produce similar themes in their stories.¹

Lévi-Strauss tried to find a system for world literature and discovered hidden structures which caused the creation of such tales. His associations with Roman Jakobson in 1941 made him use structural linguistic rules and apply them to Russian Fairy Tales, because in his opinion myth functioned

1-Vladimir Propp, "The Morphology of Russian Fairy Tales" in *David Macey's The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*(London: Penguin Books, 2000), pp 313-314.

liked language.

Since structural linguists study the underlying structure of language among the people of the world, Lèvi-Strauss has also followed the same "tradition" in discovering the underlying structure of myth, because as mentioned, he has tried to discover the underlying structure of myth to demonstrate thematic analogues among them (Lèvi- Strauss, 2000: 227-229)

Lèvi-Strauss believes that myth has a structure like language and like language, it can be reduced to the least significant unit called "mytheme". A close scrutiny of world literature demonstrates the fact that no poet or writer is original in his / her work or as T.S. Eliot has stated: "bad poets imitate and good poets steal" (Carpenter *et al*, 1966: 44). If myths have a similar structure, literatures of all nations have a similar structure too and thematic analogues can be discovered in them.

Both *The Blind Owl* and *The Sound and the Fury* are great love stories of the 20th century. In *The Blind Owl*, the narrator is in love with an undefiled, beautiful and unattainable girl who has a "...slender, ethereal, misty form ..." (Hedayat, 1957: 4) and in *The Sound and the Fury* we have a brother who is madly in love with his sister. In both novels, we notice the protagonists, trying to preserve their beloveds' innocence and purity. For instance, the protagonist of *The Blind Owl* describes how he managed to record on paper the ethereal girl's eyes which were "wet and shining like two huge black diamonds suffused with tears..." (*Ibid*: 19) and then immediately, he takes a bone-handled knife and cuts the dead body of the girl into pieces and neatly fits the trunk along with the head and limbs into the suitcase. What he desperately wants to preserve is her virgin and innocent beauty that he eternalizes through the medium of the art of painting which symbolizes writing.

The Sound and the Fury is the story of the sufferings of a brother who watches his sister grow up, have sexual experiences and consequently lose her innocence: sufferings which eventually lead him to suicide. In order to preserve his sister's chastity, the brother whose name is "Quentin", tries to stop time by breaking his watch, but then, he discovers that time in various forms, like "The appearance of the shadow of the sash on the curtains" (Faulkner, 1964: 93) or when he enters a jeweler's shop "he finds the place full of ticking..." (*Ibid*, 102), torments him and reminds him of the passage of time which will eventually wither the multifoliate Rose of Dante.

In both stories, we observe the withering of two girls: in *The Blind Owl*, the undefiled, beautiful and unattainable girl turns into a bitch, just like Caddy in *The Sound and the Fury*. In the last part of *The Blind Owl*, the image of woman is absolutely opposite the image given in the first part. In this part "woman" is no longer an untouchable being, but she has been transformed into a "bitch" who goes to bed with any man except her husband. The narrator / husband, who is an observer of such scenes, takes refuge to opium since "the sores which slowly erode [his] mind like a kind of canker," (Hedayat, 1957: 1) are gradually corroding his whole being. Quentin, in *The Sound and the Fury*, being unable to accept that his sister has lost her virginity, commits suicide by drowning himself in water.

The character of the narrator of *The Blind Owl* is comparable to that of Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury*. Both are idealists and perfectionists, to the extent that they can not accept life; because life is full of imperfections. After the ethereal girl is transformed into a "bitch", the narrator of *The Blind Owl* describes her thus:

"... she was plump and comfortable looking. She had on a cloak of Tus material. Her eyebrows were plucked and were stained with

indigo. She was wearing a beauty spot and her face was made up with rouge, ceruse and kohl. In a word she was turned out to perfection. She appeared to be well pleased with life. She was unconsciously holding the index-finger of her left hand to her lips. Was this the same graceful creature, was this the slim, ethereal girl who, in a black pleated dress, had played hide-and-seek with me on the bank of the Suran ...?" (*Ibid.*: 115)

Every flower withers eventually. Every young girl becomes a mother some day and turns into a plump and comfortable looking woman, losing her childhood innocence, but the protagonist of *The Blind Owl* cannot accept such transformations in his beloved. Quentin has similar tendencies and since he can not accept the fact that Caddy has gone to bed with a lot of men, he lies to his father about committing incest with her:

"... and he do you consider that courage and i yes sir dont you and he every man is the arbiter of his own virtues whether or not you consider it courageous is of more importance than the act itself than any act otherwise you could not be in earnest and i you dont believe i am serious and he i think you are too serious to give me any cause for alarm you wouldnt have felt driven to the expedient of telling me you have committed incest otherwise and i i wasnt lying i wasnt lying and he you wanted to sublimate a piece of natural human folly into a horror and then exorcise it with truth and i it was to isolate her out of the loud world..." (Faulkner, 1964: 219-220).

This excerpt from *The Sound and the Fury* is an example of Faulkner's stream of consciousness technique and reflects Quentin's reminiscence of a conversation which he had with his father regarding his sister, Caddy. As we

can observe, Quentin's justification of committing incest with his sister is to isolate her from "the loud world" which is the world of *The Sound and the Fury*. Turning to *The Blind Owl*, we find a similar concept: the world of the rabble from whose company the protagonist has escaped. He has "no need to see them since any one of them is a sample of the lot. Each and every one of them consisted only of a mouth and a wad of guts hanging from it, the whole terminating in a set of genitals." (*Ibid*: 76) Since then, he withdrew from the company of man, from the company of the stupid and the successful ... and only wrote for his shadow. (*Ibid*: 3)

Faulkner in *The Sound and the Fury* demonstrates a scene of Caddy's childhood to show her early promiscuity. This scene is reported by Caddy's idiot brother "Benjy", when they were all children playing. While playing, Caddy falls into muddy water and the seat of her drawers gets dirty. "She was wet. We were playing in the branch and Caddy squatted down and got her dress wet ..." (Faulkner, 1964: 19) As Benjy recalls this scene, suddenly he remembers Caddy climbing a pear tree with the muddy seat of her drawers in order to look through the window of a room. Inside the room was the corpse of their grandmother who had recently passed away but the children were told there was a party being held in that room and they were not permitted to enter it. In this scene, one of the black servants pushes Caddy to the first branch of the tree and all the children see the muddy seat of Caddy's drawers. If we take the tree as a symbol of the Tree of Knowledge, the muddy seat is an allusion to the Original Sin and Caddy's loss of innocence which will eventually turn her into a bitch. There is also a similarity and concordance between the dead grandmother's name "Dammudy" and "damn muddy". Turning to *The Blind Owl*, we see a similar scene:

"The landscape before my eyes all at once struck me as familiar. I remembered that once in my childhood on the thirteenth day of Nouruz I had come here with my mother - in - law and the bitch. That day we ran after each other and played for hours on the far side of these same cypress trees. Then we were joined by another band of children - who they were, I can not quite remember. We played hide-and-seek together. Once when I was running after the bitch on the bank of the Suran her foot slipped and she fell into the water. The others pulled her out and took her behind the cypress tree to change her clothes. I followed them. They hung up a woman's veil as a screen in front of her but I furtively peeped from behind a tree and saw her whole body. She was smiling and biting the nail of the index-finger of her left hand. Then they wrapped her up in a white cloak and spread out her fine-textured black silk dress to dry in the sun." (Hedayat, 1957: 79-80).

Both in *The Blind Owl* and *The Sound and the Fury*, we see two precocious girls having their clothes changed because they were "damn-muddy". If the black dress they are wearing stands for evil and defilement, the "white cloak" in *The Blind Owl* with which she was wrapped up, ironically refers to the narrator's attempts to preserve his beloved's chastity. The presence of the "stream", both in the picture and the real life serves as a cleansing agent. We also observe that innocent Benjy associates his sister's chastity with the smell of "trees". This concept is always repeated like a "refrain" throughout the novel. But soon after Benjy discovers that his sister has lost her chastity, he pushes her towards the bathroom. In his idiotic mind, washing the body would also wash away the sin she has committed in her puberty:

"We were in the hall. Caddy was still looking at me. Her hand was against her mouth and I saw her eyes and I cried. We went up the stairs. She stopped again, against the wall, looking at me and I cried and she went on and I came on, crying, and she shrank against the wall, looking at me. She opened the door to her room, but I pulled at her dress and we went to the bathroom and she stood against the door, looking at me. Then she put her arm across her face and I pushed at her, crying." (Faulkner, 1964: 85)

Flowers in both novels have metaphoric significance: The "morning glory" in *The Blind Owl*; "The honeysuckle" in *The Sound and The Fury*. In the former story the narrator recurrently associates morning glory with the innocence and chastity of his major female protagonist. In the first part of the novel where, as mentioned, woman is described as an undefiled, virtuous, pure and immaculate Madonna, therefore, "morning glory" is repeatedly used in this section:

"On the other side of the hill was an isolated enclosure, peaceful and green. It was a place which I had never seen before and yet it looked familiar to me, as though it had always been present in some recess of my mind. The ground was covered with vines of blue, scentless morning glory. I felt that no one until that moment had ever set foot in the place..." (Hedayat, 1957: 33).

It seems as though "morning glory" is the symbol of virginity in this novel, because whenever the narrator refers to this flower growing on the ground, he adds "...I felt that no one until that moment had ever set foot in the place ...". (*Ibid*) Therefore, when the young girl is associated with "morning glory", it is possible that, by implication, the narrator is saying that "no one has ever touched her." After he buries the ethereal girl in the first

part of the novel, he says to himself, "...when the trench was filled in I trampled the earth firm, brought a number of vines of blue, scentless morning glory and set them in the ground above her grave ..." (*Ibid*: 36).

In the last part of the novel, if there is a reference to "morning glory", it is due to the fact that the narrator is removed from the harsh world of reality and has returned to the paradise of the first part: "I had nearly reached the river Suran [when] I found the level ground was covered with vines of morning glory..." (*Ibid*: 78)

Therefore, whenever there is an association of purity and chastity regarding the ethereal girl, in the mind of the narrator, that there are plenty of citations and references to this flower and since the first part of the novel is far removed from the harsh reality of the inferno (in other words 'life'), this symbol is recurrently used there. On the contrary, in *The Sound and the Fury*, the "honeysuckle" replaces the "morning glory", but the nature of these two flowers is entirely opposite and different from each other. Therefore, "honeysuckle" does not represent chastity and purity in *The Sound and the Fury*, but its intoxicating aromatic ambrosiaceous fragrance which has a phallic effect, represents Caddy's puberty and alludes to her gaining sexual experiences. Quentin, frequently associates Caddy's sexual growth and puberty and her precociousness with the aroma of "honeysuckle". In Faulkner's novel, this flower also represents death, because Caddy, by her growth and sexual activities, gradually dies in the mind of Quentin. In other words, it is her innocence that dies or goes through a series of deteriorations in Quentin's mind and the death of Caddy's innocence leads to Quentin's death by water:

"One minute she was standing there the next he was yelling and pulling at her dress they went into the hall and up the stairs yelling and

shoving at her up the stairs to the bathroom door and stopped her back against the door and her arm across her face yelling and trying to shove her into the bathroom when she came in to supper T. P. was feeding him he started again just whimpering at first until she touched him then he yelled she stood there her eyes like cornered rats then I was running in the grey darkness it smelled of rain and all flower scents the damp warm air released and crickets sawing away in the grass pacing me with a small traveling island of silence Fancy watched me across the fence blotchy like a quilt on a line I thought damn that nigger he forgot to feed her again I ran down the hill in that vacuum of crickets like a breath traveling across a mirror she was lying in the water her head on the sand spit the water flowing about her hips there was a little more light in the water her skirt half saturated flopped along her flanks to the waters motion in heavy ripples going nowhere renewed themselves of their own movement I stood on the bank I could smell the honeysuckle on the water gap the air seemed to drizzle with honeysuckle and with the rasping of crickets a substance you could feel on the flesh." (Faulkner, 1964: 185-186)

Quentin, like the protagonist of *The Blind Owl* is obsessed with absolute truth combined with innocence and he wants to project his world view on the world but he is not aware of the fact that the world is imperfect and if one tries to search for perfection in it he will be absolutely disillusioned. Quentin's perfectionism eventually leads to his suicide by drowning. In *The Blind Owl*, we find a similar predicament for its protagonist. Perfectionism is observed in both of them in the form of obsession-compulsion. Quentin, brushes his teeth before committing suicide and arranges his clothes in his

suitcase neatly:

"I laid out two suits of underwear, with socks, shirts, collars and ties, and packed my trunk. I put in everything except my new suit and an old one and two pairs of shoes and two hats, and my books. I carried the books into the sitting-room and stacked them on the table, the ones I had brought from home and the ones "*Father said it is used to be a gentleman was known by his books: nowadays he is known by the ones he has not returned*" and locked the trunk and addressed it. The quarter hour sounded. I stopped and listened to it until the chimes ceased." (*Ibid*: 99)

Why should a person attempting suicide in a few hours arrange his clothes in such a neat way in his suitcase and what difference does it make if his books and clothes reach their destination? The only justification for this neurotic eccentricity is abnormal obsessive - compulsiveness which forces the victim to put things in such an absolute order and perfectionism just a few hours before bidding farewell to this world. By reference to *The Blind Owl*, we notice the same reaction in the form of phobia:

"Lying in this damp, sweaty bed, as my eyelids grew heavy and I longed to surrender myself to non-being and everlasting night, I felt that my lost memories and forgotten fears were all coming to life again: fear lest the feathers in my pillow should turn into dagger - blades or the buttons on my coat expand to the size of millstones; fear lest the breadcrumbs that fell to the floor should shatter into fragments like pieces of glass; apprehension lest the oil in the lamp should spill during my sleep and set fire to the whole city; anxiety lest the paws of the dog outside the butcher's shop should ring like horses' hoofs as they struck the ground; dread lest the old odds-and-ends man sitting

behind his wares should burst into laughter and be unable to stop; fear lest the worms in the footbath by the tank in our court yard should turn into Indian serpents; fear lest my bedclothes should turn into a hinged gravestone above me and the marble teeth should lock, preventing me from ever escaping; panic fear lest I should suddenly lose the faculty of speech and, however much I might try to call out, nobody should ever come to my aid ..." (Hedayat, 1957: 19)

The type of phobia presented in the form of obsessive - compulsiveness observed in both protagonists, could be fear of the imperfections of the world; a world in which only "The rabble" can have a good time. For men of heart and soul, this world, the real world, should be entirely altered and re-molded:

Ah, Love! Could you and I with Him conspire
To grasp this sorry scheme of Things entire,
Would not we shatter it to bits - and then

Re - mould it nearer to the Heart's Desire! (Edward FitzGerald, 1960, XCIX)

As Virginia Woolf had predicted, the future of the novel has got to be poetic. Since in modern and contemporary fiction we notice the absence of a clear plot, of rising and falling action and dénouement, in other words, the modern and post-modern fiction are open-ended and the reader is not expected to reach a conclusion, the novelist is free to use literary devices such as symbols and images. A poet is an alchemist of words, that is to say, he knows how to combine words in order to create rhythmic harmony. Therefore, the principal difference between poetry and prose is not rhyme and rhythm, but selection and combination. In our time, fiction resembles poetry in different respects. In order to elucidate this point, let us examine

the following excerpt from *The Blind Owl*.

"The night was departing on tip - toe. One felt that it had shed sufficient of its weariness to enable it to go its way. The ear detected faint, far-off sounds such as the sprouting grass might have made, or some migratory bird as it dreamed upon the wing. The pale stars were disappearing behind banks of cloud. I felt the gentle breath of the morning on my face and at the same moment a cock crowed somewhere in the distance." (Hedayat, 1957: 27-28)

The use of literary devices such as "personification" by which inanimate objects like "night" take on human qualities and "depart on tip-toe" or "shed their weariness" or hearing the sound of "sprouting grass" or "the dreaming of birds", all testify to the poetic quality of this excerpt from Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*. Turning to *The Sound and the Fury*, we find plenty of such examples:

"When the shadow of the sash appeared on the curtain it was between seven and eight o'clock and then I was in time again, hearing the watch. It was Grandfather's and when father gave it to me he said, Quentin, I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire ; it's rather excruciating-ly apt that you will use it to gain the *reducto absurdum* of all human experience which can fit your individual needs no better than it fitted his or his father's. I give it to you not that you may remember time, but that you might forget it now and then for a moment and not spend all your breath trying to conquer it. Because no battle is ever won he said. They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools." (Faulkner, 1964: 93)

Reconsidering thematic analogues in both novels, one may reach the

conclusion that social, historical and economic upheavals have led both writers to lament such drastic devaluation of values in their societies. If we decode the polysemic aspects of both works of fiction, we will notice that they are not just the lamentations of two lovers for the loss of innocence in their beloveds. The women in both novels are symbolic of a nation. Caddy may symbolize The United States, especially its Southern states which changed from an agrarian culture into an industrial one, at the turn of the century. Quentin, who drowns himself for the loss of innocence in his sister, might represent William Faulkner who laments the industrialization of the Southern states which destroyed the serene, peaceful and calm ambience of the past, and instead brought with itself the bellowing, the sound and the fury of the idiot brother, Benjy. [in the story, the Compson family sells Benjy's pasture, symbol of agrarian society, in order to send Quentin to the industrial world of Harvard]. William Faulkner, as a poet, philosopher prophet, could predict that some day technology would be used as a tool to exploit the weaker nations of the world.

If we compare and contrast the white aristocratic characters of the novel with their negro attendants, we will notice that the blacks have preserved their innocent identity because they refused to accept the sick values of the whites; they are neither alcoholic, nor hypochondriac and they are not schizophrenic like Quentin Compson. The black characters are happy and healthy because they did not want to be victimized by false values which the Compsons had blindly accepted. It is ironic that "Jason", whose name is a mythological allusion to a leader in Greek Legend in quest of the Golden Fleece, and hence a businessman in the novel, should be the sole master of the family.

Turning to *The Blind Owl*, we may observe a similar influence. In some

of his earlier writings, Hedayat displayed strong nationalist sentiments, and he learned the ancient Pahlavi Language, or Middle Persian, from which he translated a few texts into modern Persian. An outspoken example of his nationalist fiction is his first published work, the historical play *Parvin the Sasanian Girl*. A close comparison of this with *The Blind Owl* gives the impression of parallelism both in character and in theme. For instance, Parvin may be seen as a counterpart to the ethereal girl, and his fiancée's idealism as corresponding to that of the narrator of *The Owl*. The story of Parvin occurs in the twenty second year of Hijra and the setting is the city of "Rages" or "Ray". Rages was a flourishing city and a centre of Zoroastrian religion which was conquered by the Arabs. It is also the ancient city in which part two of *The Blind Owl* is set. It is possible to see the ethereal woman as symbolizing ancient glory that had ended up in backwardness because of foreign conquest and, although one must bear in mind that the story of the ethereal girl is set in the midst of contemporary squalor, it is the story of the bitch which is set in the city of Ray's glorious days. Both Hedayat's and Faulkner's famous novels reflect on the psychology and sociology of their very different environments. Yet there seem to be structural similarities between them, of which neither of the author's could have been aware.

References

- 1- Carpenter, E., *et. al. Explorations in Communication*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1966.
- 2- Faulkner, W., *The Sound and The Fury*, New York: Vintage Books, 1964.
- 3- FitzGerald, E., *The Ruba'iyat of Omar Khayyam, XCIX*, London: John Calder Publishers, Ltd., 1960.

- 4- Hedayat, S., *The Blind Owl*, tr. D. P. Costello, London: John Calder Publishers, Ltd., 1957.
- 5- Lévi- S. C., "Structural Anthropology". In David Macey's *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*, London: Penguin Books, 2000.
- 6- Propp, V., "The Morphology of Russian Fairy Tales". in David Macey's *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*, London: Penguin Books, 2000.