THE INSTINCT OF DEATH IN ALDOUS HUXLEY’S BRAVE NEW WORLD

Abstract

Aldous Huxley, the British novelist, focuses in his dystopian novel Brave New World on issues such as the annihilation of the individual for the sake of the State, the eradication of social institutions like the family, biological conditioning, classification of the people into particular segments, and sexuality without a reproductive purpose. Apart from these issues, the novel presents a picture of John the Savage in his travel to the World State from the savage reservation where he was biologically born, and of the ensuing events that eventually lead to his self-confinement and self-annihilation in a lighthouse. At this point the question arises as to whether or not his suicide can be regarded as an embrace of death rather than a confrontation with it. This paper aims to come up with an answer to this question by analyzing the way John relates himself to the World State and his resort to suicide from a psychoanalytical perspective.

Keywords: death drive, psychoanalysis, Freud, Huxley, civilization
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Anahtar kelimeler: ölüm itkisi, psikanaliz, Freud, Huxley, medeniyet

1. Introduction

Brave New World is a dystopian novel which was written by Aldous Huxley in 1932. The novel is set in a future London where the World State has created a particular civilization which is centred on the notion of artificiality in almost every aspect of human life. Its artificiality is most readily evident in the way the natural reproduction of human beings has been replaced with the breeding of human embryos in hatcheries; and it works in such a way as to create a society whose members are biologically pre-programmed and conditioned from the very start to fit into their future social statuses which they have been destined to.

Moreover, it is a world where the population is strictly governed by various methods to ensure that stability is kept in constant effect. Anything that might disturb the stability is excluded or manipulated in such a way as to keep it going. Maintaining a secure level of stability is not an easy job; and Controllers of the World State such as Mustapha Mond are well aware of it. That is why the residents of civilized London are conditioned from the very start of their lives to lead a soma-induced happy life in which “they’re well off; they’re safe; they’re never ill” (Huxley, 1969: 173). In other words, they are systematically prevented from having a reason to complain about something and from disturbing the stability.

The goal of this paper is to analyse Huxley’s Brave New World from Freud’s perspective particularly on the death instinct and its relation to aggressiveness. Additional emphasis will be placed upon the larger context in which its significance lies for the Freudian conception of civilization to contrast with Huxley’s projection of it in the future London. To this end, we will largely draw on Freud’s thoughts about instincts of death and aggressiveness. John will be of special interest to our discussion because he is distinguished from other characters primarily by his birth and his death and his aggressiveness. Unlike others, his birth, accidental though it may

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be, is completely natural and biological, and his death takes place as a consequence of a self-conscious suicidal act. His aggression is not solely directed at himself; he does not whip only himself. His outward aggressiveness finds its best expression in his whipping Lenina to death. At the heart of our argument will be the point that the Freudian understanding of the death instinct and aggressiveness could allow us to read John’s suicide as an embrace of death rather than a desperate act of self-denial.

2. The Death Instinct As It Manifests Itself in Brave New World

To begin with, in 1920 Freud made a distinction in his Beyond the Pleasure Principle between two kinds of instincts: “those which seek to lead what is living to death, and others, the sexual instincts, which are perpetually attempting and achieving a renewal of life” (2015, 39). He called the former the death instinct, while he called the latter the life instinct, or Eros. When he wrote The Id And The Ego three years later in 1923, he revisited his former division of instincts into two, and defined the purpose of the death instinct as leading “organic life back into the inanimate state” (1984: 380). In his later years, while he was writing Civilization and Its Discontents, he recounted how his reflections on “the compulsion to repeat and the conservative character of instinctual life” enabled him in the first place to become aware of these two kinds of instincts (1989, 77). In this work, he opted for the use of ‘aggressiveness’ as the term to denote what he formerly called the death instinct because “a portion of the instinct [of death] … [can be] diverted towards the external world [as well]” (78).

According to Freud, civilization should be defined as “a process in the service of Eros, whose purpose is to combine single human individuals, and after that families, then races, peoples and nations, into one great unity, the unity of mankind.” The instinct of aggression, however, “constitutes the greatest impediment to civilization” (81). To tackle this hindrance, civilization creates a cultural superego and lets it issue “the commandment to love one’s neighbour as oneself” (108). The World State of Brave New World seems to be well aware of this. Except for John, the Fordians have all been conditioned to love each other, though with special care taken by the World State not to allow it to be “too much” (Huxley, 1969: 185). Only John in Brave New World is capable of hating and expressing his hatred in an aggressive manner, because unlike others, he has not been exposed to civilization which “obtains mastery over the individual’s dangerous desire for aggression by weakening and disarming it and by setting up an agency within him to watch over it, like a garrison in a conquered city” (Freud, 1989: 84). By behaving aggressively, John is actually expressing his claim of “the right to be unhappy” (Huxley, 1969: 187). By refusing to take soma, he is, in fact, refusing to share the Fordian belief that “pain’s a delusion” (195). All this shows that he is at odds with the Fordian civilization in every respect; therefore, he can be justly considered as the emblem of unorthodoxy which “threatens more than the life of a mere individual; it strikes at Society itself” (120).

As elucidated above, what gives Freud the impetus to make the death instinct part of his larger theory of instincts is what he calls the compulsion to repeat. It leads Freud to consider the event of death as a return to the beginning:

But how is the predicate of being ‘instinctual’ related to the compulsion to repeat? At this point we cannot escape a suspicion that we may have come upon the track of a universal attribute of instincts and perhaps of organic life in general which has not hitherto been clearly recognized or at least not explicitly stressed. It seems, then, that an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity
has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces; that is, it is a kind of organic elasticity, or, to put it another way, the expression of the inertia inherent in organic life. (2015, 30)

Freud considers death as an event that leads a living organism back to its inorganic state, and he follows Schopenhauer in concluding that, at least hypothetically, “the aim of all life is death” (32). In *Brave New World*, however, death is treated lightly, like a daily phenomenon to be taken for granted. It is not even allowed to be a cause of lamentation. The World State utilizes the technique of conditioning to get its citizens while they are only babies to regard death as something not to be feared: “Death conditioning begins at eighteen months. Every tot spends two mornings a week in a Hospital for the Dying. All the boys are kept there, and they get chocolate cream on death days. They learn to take dying as a matter of course” (1969, 131). In other words, death is allowed to exist for citizens of the World State only as something completely stripped of its ontological sense and functionality.

The common attitude towards death in the civilized London of *Brave New World* can most readily be seen in Chapter 14, where John’s mother, Linda, dies “in company and with all the modern conveniences” in the Park Lane hospital for the Dying (157). The nurse is shocked to hear John’s enquiry about the chances of his mother remaining alive. There are two reasons behind this: in the Fordian Civilization a) nobody mourns the death of anybody; b) nobody is born to a parent. Moreover, while remembering dreamily his childhood memories with tears in his eyes at her bedside, John is suddenly woken up by the nightmarish interference of a flock of eight-year-old male twins rushing all at once in the room. To John, it is a total shock; the children are “squealing and chattering” in a place where it should normally be considered indecorous to do so (159). Hitting a child to stop him from behaving disrespectfully towards his mother, John is given a warning not to interfere with the death conditioning of the children. When John accuses the children of being “disgraceful,” the nurse gives him a harsh response: “Disgraceful? But what do you mean? They’re being death-conditioned” (160).

A similar scene takes place when the nurse issues a harsher warning once again in an attempt to prevent John from shouting for someone to help to resuscitate his dying mother, fearing that he might decondition the children. At this point, John feels helpless and begins sobbing uncontrollably, causing a sight that has never been seen before:

The nurse stood irresolute, looking now at the kneeling figure by the bed (the scandalous exhibition!) and now (poor children) at the twins who had stopped their hunting of the zipper and were staring from the other end of the ward, staring with all their eyes and nostrils at the shocking scene that was being enacted round Bed 20. Should she speak to him? Try to bring him back to a sense of decency? Remind him of where he was? Of what fatal mischief he might do these poor innocents? Undoing all their wholesome death-conditioning with this disgusting outcry – as though death were something terrible, as though anyone mattered as much as all that! It might give them the most disastrous ideas about the subject, might upset them into reacting in the entirely wrong, the utterly anti-social way. (163)

Through the death conditioning, the World State can be argued to succeed in altering the effects of death on the human psychology; however, there is no way to eradicate the death instinct and aggressiveness. Manipulation at the behavioural level can be possible, whereas manipulation at the instinctual level is next to being impossible. The ontological reality of death and aggressive-
ness cannot be modified under any circumstances, because it is, as Freud argues, “original and self-substituting instinctual disposition in man” (1989, 81). Unable to succeed in doing away with the instinct of aggression, the World State therefore compels its citizens to take the Violent Passion Surrogate (V.P.S.) regularly:

[…]

Isn’t there something in living dangerously?

‘There’s a great deal in it,’ the Controller replied. ‘Men and women must have their adrenals stimulated from time to time.’

‘What?’ questioned the Savage, uncomprehending.

‘It’s one of the conditions of perfect health. That’s why we’ve made the V.P.S. treatments compulsory.’

‘V.P.S.?’

‘Violent Passion Surrogate. Regularly once a month. We flood the whole system with adrenalin. It’s the complete physiological equivalent of fear and rage. All the tonic effects of murdering Desdemona and being murdered by Othello, without any of the inconveniences.’ (1969: 186-87).

The World State is clearly aware that it cannot entirely wipe off the inclination to be violent. All it can do best is to create a simulation of it with its side effects reduced to a minimum. Freud argues that civilizations feel the need to keep the instinct of aggressiveness in balance:

[…] Instinctual passions are stronger than reasonable interests. Civilization has to use its utmost efforts in order to set limits to man’s aggressive instincts and to hold the manifestations of them in check by psychical reaction-formations. Hence, therefore, the use of methods intended to incite people into identifications and aim-inhibited relationships of love, hence the restriction upon sexual life, and hence too the ideal’s commandment to love one’s neighbour as oneself—a commandment which is really justified by the fact that nothing else runs so strongly counter to the original nature of man. (1989: 69-70)

The nurse is, therefore, right to fear that the children might get deconditioned, and it is true that they might show behavioural deviations in case their conditioning gets corrupted. In this regard, the last chapter of Brave New World appears to be the locus where it becomes fully apparent that not only John but also the residents of the Fordian London are driven by their instincts of death and aggressiveness when they demand that John whip himself and Lenina.

John leaves London and takes shelter in a faraway lighthouse in the hope of enjoying a solitary way of living. His initial solitude at the lighthouse is abruptly spoiled when three Delta-Minus landworkers happen to see him whipping himself “to be purified and made good” (1969: 192). This first intrusion is further followed by reporters from various media organizations who eagerly want to bring him to the headlines. He is no longer allowed to remain alone. Seeing that Lenina is also among the sightseers, he desires to approach her but hesitates to do so. When Lenina instead moves forward with her arms stretched out towards John, he can’t help bowing to the temptation to attack first Lenina and then himself with a whip amid cheers coming up from the crowd to “kill it, kill it, kill it” in an orgy-like excitement:

Drawn by the fascination of the horror of pain and, from within, impelled by that habit of cooperation, that desire for unanimity and atonement, which their conditioning had so ineradicably implanted in them, they began to mime the frenzy of his gestures, strik-
ing at one another as the Savage struck at his own rebellious flesh, or at that plump in-
carnation of turpitude writhing in the heather at his feet. (200)

The interesting thing is that the death-conditioned crowd also desires to witness death oc-
cur in an act of killing just like the children brought to the Park Lane hospital for the Dying do, the adult Fordians also take great pleasure in seeing it happen. The reason that the bystanders are delighted to treat the brutal act of violence as if it was a sexually pleasurable act can be ex-
plained by Freud’s emphasis on the pleasure principle which dictates that the destructive in-
stincts be “rendered harmless by being fused with erotic components”. In John’s case, however, these instincts “are diverted towards the external world in the form of aggression” (1984: 395). Either case makes it clear that such instincts exist and show up in one way or another. All this can be taken as textual evidence to support Freud’s argument about the psychological perva-
siveness of the death instinct: “[...] Men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness” (1989: 68). When the crowd disperses after midnight, John falls asleep. Waking up late the day after, he feels guilty for what he has done and hangs himself.

3. Conclusion

A counter argument such as the following one might be put forward: while he was still alive, John tried to lead a solitary life at the lighthouse and sought to get purified and make amends through a strictly disciplined self-punishment. He desired to be the John that he had been before he came to the civilized London. But his solitary life was disturbed by the arrival of reporters and the citizens of the Fordian London, which eventually led to a failure in his plans to start afresh. At that point, it is possible that John might have decided to kill himself, seeing that striving to preserve his savageness on the one hand and continuing to exist among the Fordians on the other hand was bound to be futile. Our discussion is, however, oriented to the argument that, irrespective of whether he killed himself because he had to or he wanted to, in death he sought a way back to where he had begun.

From the very start to the very end, John has actually been entirely alone. He has had no one to share his birth, nor has he had anyone to share his death. As a lonely man he crossed the borderline that separated civilization from savagery; he has now sought a way to return to his former state of existence. And consequently he has done it, whether consciously or uncon-
sciously, by following his instincts of aggression and death.

REFERENCES


