

Proletariat versus Bourgeoisie in a comparative study of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" and Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess"

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Abstract - This essay discusses two literary works addressing the powerlessness of two characters surrounded in a bourgeois system: Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown* (1846) and Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" (1842). These two works show the plight of the characters dominated in bourgeois societies. *My Last Duchess* and *Young Goodman Brown* are among the works their writers had very little in mind about Marxism when they wrote them. Anyhow, one can analyze the above mentioned works on the basis of the Marxist elements within them to see the impact of bourgeoisie on the lives of the proletariats. One can realize the influential factor of base in determining the superstructure of the society: religion, culture, art and literature are all parts of the superstructure which are dominated by the base in any community. It is shown that the people's interests, desires and their ideology are defined on the basis of the economic structure. Some critics' views, such as Person, Bressler, Hawlin and etc. as well as the writer's view will be used to discuss the main points. The class conflict is currently visible between the bourgeois and the proletariat system.

Key Words - ideology, base, superstructure, class conflicts, proletariat, bourgeoisie.

I. Introduction

Robert Browning's dramatic poem, "My Last Duchess" is an example presenting a high class member, a duke who is presented through his dramatic monologue. The poem's narrator is the duke of Ferrara, who comments dispassionately on the portrait of his late wife hanging on the wall, remarking on the duchess's innocence and character. He reveals that the duchess had incurred his displeasure by her expansive friendliness and her refusal to acknowledge his superiority in all things. It becomes apparent at last that he himself brought about her death. The envoy or the messenger who is in charge of the murder is not even allowed to scrutinize the case fully because he is a member of the proletariat. The same thing happens in Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story, "Young Goodman Brown", we follow Goodman Brown who undertakes a journey down a dark forest path that reveals the true character of the religious people of Puritan New England, who were once Goodman Brown's catechizers. While he is accompanied by Satan carrying a serpentine stick in his hand, he witnesses his religious teachers there in the forest sitting at a table with his newly-wed wife, Faith, whom he

believes he can resort to her skirts to go to the heaven. They were, in fact, the followers of the Satan, but they were behaving in a way to show themselves to be the real Christians and the elects. By means of their false ideology, they could convincingly trick the simple-minded people to follow them. This gives them a strong will to control these people. These apparent superior people were dominating, exploiting and belittling the people, while the lower class interests, desires and values were not taken into account.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown* and Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess* can be compared to each other in terms of presenting a class conflict between the characters. According to Person, Goodman Brown has to wrestle with his ability to know other people's motives as well as his own. He wonders whether he is the only one in the village who has not given in to the Satan's temptations or not! He is wondered by what the Satan says about the superior people (bourgeois group) of the village and himself as an ordinary person (a proletariat) who has always given in to their instructions. Hawthorne leaves his readers in doubt with an ambiguous and indeterminate realm that Goodman Brown is dreaming or he is experiencing these terms of control in the Puritan society of

late 17th century New England ([9], P. 42). By the same token, as we read the latter case study, we come to understand the full dramatic situation of the poem. The Duke, who is egocentric, vengeful, and possessive, kills his duchess quietly because she did not dedicate herself completely to the duke and his wishes because her behavior was not suitable for a high rank duchess. Now, he is thinking about another marriage with a Count's daughter, someone who is lower in rank than a duke of noblest position. Ostensibly, he is thinking about the dowry that would come with the next wife although he states that the dowry is not important to him. This can be an opportunity for the apparent suave and urban duke to possess what has already missed in his first marriage. That is to say, he has a utilitarian outlook towards the people, especially the working class around himself. In addition, Hawlin argues that he has taken the Count's envoy or the messenger (a proletariat) up to the first-floor of his palace in order to look at some of his art treasures, to prove to the envoy that he is a real connoisseur of art: that he likes to possess and control whatever is in front of him ([5], pp. 67-8), so both the Puritans in *Young Goodman Brown* and the duke in the latter case study are of the opinion about the proletariats and the people around them.

Marx (1818-1883) saw history as the story of class struggles in which the oppressed fight against their oppressors. Marx viewed history in three successive stages: First in ancient and the middle ages the landed and wealthy had oppressed the slaves and the poorest plebeians and laborers. Then, by the invention of new technologies, market forces grew stronger and everything changed. The middle classes began to gain wealth and power from trade and manufacture and they challenged the power and authority of the old rulers. This struggle brought about a new challenge between the bourgeoisie (those who possessed properties) and the proletariat (the working class). Marx asserted that the proletariats were exploited by the bourgeois in a cruel way. He gave an example of the products produced in a factory out of the workers' labors. They are sold more than the workers' wages. The capitalists sell these manufactured products more than their real prices. In this way, the capitalists are going to make profits, but the workers are not going to benefit from such added values. Therefore the wealth of the capitalists is dependent on the proletariat and they need an underclass, but Marx believed that this will not last long since it arouses resentment and the lack of satisfaction. As a result, a revolution will be inevitable with the proletariat leading the battle against the bourgeoisie. After the bourgeoisie is overcome, a classless group will dominate the society and all of the people will have the right to use their country's properties, resources, educational rights and all their requirements [7]. Bressler also refers to even a more dangerous consequence of the capitalists' controlling behavior. He adds that Marx and Engels were afraid of the proletariats' ideology including the ruling ideas, customs and practices, and etc. which were consciously and

unconsciously enslaved by the ruling class ideology. The bourgeoisie ideology effectively shapes the working class ideology to assume that the material relationships are the expression of the ruling ideas. This negative sense of ideology will give the proletariat a false consciousness which shapes the class consciousness and every person's self definition ([2], p. 194).

There are many quotations by different critics on both Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown* and Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess*. According to Lawrence, the duke of Ferrara could not tolerate his wife's compliments of a servant's gift, her delight in sunsets and even in animals because they were all signs of being kind and sensitive which were not in conformity with a bourgeois life of a duke, so he captured her in a way that was unable to do in life.

“...I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive....” ([6], pp. 161-2).

Elsewhere, Ousby refers to the duke of Ferrara that he murdered his duchess since he was jealously obsessed with the duchess, and he hated her vivacity and simplicity therefore he had arranged for her murder ([8], p. 665). Guerin argues that Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown* can be analyzed psychologically based on the Id versus Superego criterion which is only applicable for the proletariats of the Puritan community. Goodman Brown has to listen to the words of the old Goody Cloyse and Deacon Gookin as the real bourgeois religious lessons and accordingly the ideology of the Puritans and this creates an ambiguous and imbalance for Goodman Brown in a way that he cannot decide whether he is a normal or an abnormal individual ([4], pp. 169-71). Goodman Brown also implies a man who is not proud of himself and it really represents a proletariat who always obeys the instructions of his old masters. In this regard Barnett states that the name of Goodman Brown implies a polite man who is of a humble standing ([1], p. 74).

This paper portrays two communities ruled by the bourgeois system and the proletariats who are deafly inclined to the instructions given by the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie negative impacts on the proletariats' lives can be shown. It is indicated that the proletariats are belittled, oppressed and even murdered just to guarantee the respect and welfare of the bourgeois system. Surprisingly, we witness that the proletariats are condemned to accept the religion, attitude and the norms of the society set by the bourgeoisie.

2. Discussion

Several clues are given in Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess* proving that the bourgeoisie empowered the duke

to manipulate his duchess who was below in rank to him and others, especially the proletariats. First, apart from the duke, all the characters in the mentioned poem are placed in a lower socioeconomic condition and they represent the proletariat. Bressler argues that the envoy that has come to the duke has to listen to the duke's speech without uttering a word because unlike the duke he works for his life and if he arranges a marriage between the duke and the Count's daughter, he can afford a living; otherwise, he can't. Therefore, he has to listen to the duke's words. Second, when the duke asserts that he himself has murdered his duchess, the envoy rises to go out ahead of his master murderer, but the duke says, "Nay, we'll go/Together down, sir." In order to confirm his social position to the envoy who is only a proletariat. Third, the duke chooses a monk to portray his duchess while she was alive since the monks are sexually powerless and are quite ready to be at the service of the people ([3], pp. 123-5). Fourth, at the beginning of the monologue the duke invites the envoy to consider the beauty of the portrait of his last duchess drawn by the monk in the manner of a connoisseur. Hawlin also asserts that the emphasis first appears to be on the painter's skill, but soon any reader realizes the underlying and deadly annoyance of the seemingly smooth tone of the duke. Finally, the duke is having a materialistic look at the people around him. He scornfully looks at the people as objects. In this regard, the same writer reasserts:

"I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretence
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object."

One would be amazed by the duke's first assertion that the Count is a generous man and he was not in need of saying anything to the Count for the dowry. He pretends that talking about the money is distasteful telling the envoy to give the Count this message that his daughter is the only object he requires. The duke has changed his live wife to a drawing on the wall. He has metamorphosed a living being into an object. One would feel that there won't be any better destiny for his new wife ([5], pp. 67-69).

The Puritans who held the power in Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown* controlled the proletariat in a variety of ways: The bourgeoisie ideology is that the proletariats must work during the day and sleep through the night in order to guarantee their enjoyable life in the ignorance of the working class. Therefore, they can hold their secret ceremonies during the time they are sleeping. Bressler also proves this idea that the hegemony of the bourgeoisie enslaves not only Goodman Brown, but also all members of the proletariat to keep the embers of the capitalist fire burning all the time. The working classes including Goodman Brown have to work continuously to keep the economic structure of the society upright, so through the

hard work of the proletariat they can control them ([2], pp. 208-9). Another medium through which the Puritans could control the proletariats at that time was via the concept of sin. Faith, Goodman Brown's wife, thinks of the spiritual heaven, in which her devotion to bourgeois hegemony would be rewarded. She thinks she would be able to experience an ideal world or a utopia where there is no social class and equality among the people, but her communion with the forest settlers violated Brown's consciousness, and he found out that the concept of sin is invented by the bourgeois Puritans to control the behavior of the proletariat in order not to endanger their welfare. There he comes to realize the role of bourgeois Puritanism in his own life. Wright also argues that the shadow of sin falls not only upon Brown but it also falls on Faith symbolized by her pink ribbon implying that she is one of the devil's converts herself ([11], p. 238). Yet the Puritans exerted their influence through their strong power in the society. They were against the natural instincts of man or what Freud called libido. Guerin asserts that the dangers of an overactive suppression of libido will result in a cruel use of superego in the society. Goodman Brown could not balance the world within and the world without since the Puritan society had shut his eyes on the naturalness of the man's instincts and he could not believe that the religious members of his community did have that naturalness. He thought of them as real and pure human beings with no faults and sins like the angels of God, but he was seriously mistaken ([4], p. 171).

There are many similarities between Nathaniel Hawthorne's "*Young Goodman Brown*" and Robert Browning's "*My Last Duchess*" in this respect. Both the duke in Browning's *My Last Duchess* and the Puritans in Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown* are willing to control people by means of their dominant hegemony, either by the duke's position or influence in the society, or by the Puritans' religious elders. In the same way that the duke tries to enslave the envoy, the monk who pictured his wife's portrait, and his wife; the Puritans enslaved not only Goodman Brown, but also his wife, Faith, as two members of the proletariat and all the ordinary members of the community. A more pointed observation by Bressler clears the idea that the Puritans including the Deacon and Goody Cloyce allowed the proletariat or the working class to work during the day and sleep at nights in order for them to conduct their ceremonies at nights when the proletariat are ignorant. By the same token, the duke never allowed an ordinary painter or the emissary to go over their class limits ([2], pp. 208-11). On the contrary, there is a marked contrast between these two literary works: The duke in Browning's *My Last Duchess* represents a despotic bourgeois ruler who knows nothing about the human worth and morality, and in this respect Hawlin argues that the duke is egocentric, vengeful and possessive and has murdered his first wife because she did not devote herself totally to him ([5], p. 67). While the Puritans in Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown*, tried to brand,

ostracize and scapegoat others from the society and the result was that they believed to be cleansing themselves of all the filth they have acquired through living in the public. The bourgeois leaders knew people to be inferior to them. Branding Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is good example in point proving the Puritans' behavior towards the people of their own community. She is condemned to wear the scarlet letter A on the bodice of her dress for all her life. Goodman Brown's dying hour, Person asserts, is gloomy since the horrible vision of the Puritans vanishes away the rational humanity from the proletariat members of the community. Following his death, the Puritans did not allow anything to be carved on his tombstone in order to show that he has led quite an ordinary life, just like any other member of that society ([9], pp. 43-4). Another discriminating line between these two works is that the duke in Browning's *My Last Duchess* talks more about his deceased wife telling the readers his last duchess was too flighty, impressionable and ungrateful as Lawrence argues in order for us to find fault with her being very responsive to others, but through the dramatic monologue, one would realize that the duke more and more exposes himself to the readers about his own real nature and character. However, Hawthorne narrates his story in the third person point of view making his readers realize the unfair situation of the proletariat living in that time period ([6], p. 161).

3. Conclusion

Consequently as it is discussed Marxism declares the idea that any society is built upon a base or the economic structure, which is also explained by Ousby that society and economic forces constitute the base of a particular historical system. Then the autonomy of superstructures which include the ideology, literature, art, music and etc. will rest on the base ([8], P. 608). Thoburn proves his idea that in such a system there will be permanent unbridled and unhealthy appetites with the bourgeois law which it can be seen in the upper reaches of the society. The wealth created by these financial gambles will lead to its gratification of the natural requirements in which money, filth and blood mix with one another. ([10], p. 57). The final result is the resentment of the proletariat and the unfair gratification of the bourgeoisie.

In a capitalist system, one will face two groups of people: the bourgeois and the proletariat. The characters of the duke in "*My Last Duchess*" and the Puritan leaders of "*Young Goodman Brown*" were unquestionably considered bourgeois who were more inclined to possess people for their own requirements ignoring the lower class attitudes, interests, and even their existence as human beings. They withheld the ordinary people from having some night parties as they themselves did and benefited from the proletariats' ignorance as it was shown in Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown*. We witnessed that they kept people busy during the day until they got tired and could

not spend some night hours to relax and refresh themselves in order not to think about their metamorphosis. They even had power over the people's lives by having them murdered and there was nobody to question them since they held the base or the economy in their society and could easily manipulate the superstructure. Similarly, the duke in Browning's *My Last Duchess* was egocentric, possessive and cruel who did not notice the lower class attitude and humanity and he even murdered his duchess since she was not totally devoted to him. There is a marked difference between the two literary works in that the duke relates his own story of murder in a dramatic monologue and the more he talks about the faults he has found in his last duchess, the more he reveals about his own character. On the other hand, Hawthorne uses a third person point of view to narrate *Young Goodman Brown* in a manner where the reader takes distance from all that happens in the story. The effect of such a psychic distance in narration can be witnessing the events in a proletariat's life with a critical outlook so as to sharpen our views from what happens around us.

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Vitae



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