

Encountering Death: Interpreting Ethan Brand's Psychache

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Abstract:

In the era when the crisis of scientific belief arises, the introversion of self-reflection of human beings tends to turn inward. With the birth and development of the theory of divine analysis, the subjectivity of human beings is once again concerned. Hawthorne's short story Ethan Brand, tells the story of Ethan Brand, a seeker with religious fervor for "unpardonable sin". Brand returns home after an 18-year search, but on the first night of his return, he plunges into a blazing lime kiln and ends his life. Although the whole short story only tells the events of one night, the author shows the psychological conflicts and self-loss of the unforgivable fanatical pursuer to the readers through the careful depiction of the psychological activities of Ethan Brand. In the age of the crisis of faith, the re-exploration of the death of Ethan Brand has profound significance. In the current situation where rationality and science occupy a dominant position, the spiritual world of Ethan Brand presents a state of conflict and self-loss, which reflects the self-reflection of human beings. Fundamentally, the death of Ethan Brand is rooted in disillusionment with humanity's subordination to reason and science.

Keywords: Ethan Brand, psychache,

“People who have suffered can’t be aware of the severity of the pain when suffering, but the prolonged torture afterwards can most pierce the heart”(Hawthorne, 2018, p. 97). Ethan Brand, a fanatical pursuer of the “unpardonable sin”, returns home after eighteen years of exploring; however, on the first night of his return, he throws himself into the lime-kiln burning with roaring flames. Edwin Shneidman, a pioneer in the study of Suicidology, has said that “the negative thoughts of suicide are all caused by psychache”. Where is no psychache, there is no suicide. The term “psychache” refers to the unbearable psychological pains caused by the frustration of people’s most important needs(DeSpelder&Strickland, 2013, p. 422). Although the short story only tells about the events that takes place mainly on one night, Nathaniel Hawthorne depicts the psychological pains of Ethan Brand elaborately, which provides clues for readers to finds the reasons of Ethan Brand’s Death.

In the loneliness and darkness, Brand conceives the idea of seeking the “unpardonable sin”. The remote environment that is a few miles from the village makes Ethan Brand less integrated into the community, so he highly concentrates his psychic energy on himself(DeSpelder&Strickland, 2013, p. 417). The “unpardonable sin” lures Brand, as the flames of hellfire lures pilgrims. Satan in the lime-kiln glows with light in his psychological forest where he discovers the shadow of the sin of mankind--the “unpardonable sin”. Since then, seeking the “unpardonable sin” has become the only wish and desire in his heart. Brand accepts the guidance of the “unpardonable sin” joins with the devil Satan, and takes humans as the little experimental mice in an appointed assistant to conduct psychological experiments. After eighteen years of exploring, he discovers that the “unpardonable sin” exists in his own heart, which signs Ethan Brand’s ideal image of himself is constructed completely. In order to compensate for his sense of worthlessness, Brand images himself as a great explorer of human nature led by the stars and covered by the glory of heaven. Ethan Brand regards the “unpardonable sin” as an indispensable and inseparable part of his ideal self. Driven by his need, Ethan Brand is indulged in the pride system composed of neurotic pride, neurotic claims, tyranny of the “shoulds” and self-hate(Frager&Fadiman, 2017, p. 132).

Neurotic pride is rooted in the characteristics of the idealized image(p. 132). Brands’ idealized image, a wise man superior to ordinary people possessing superior sensitivity and wisdom, can be revealed from his actions, postures, expressions and paroles. He travels thousands of miles alone to pursuit the “unpardonable sin” and returns home in silken robes after finding it. When he describes the process, he stands erect with a pride that distinguishes all enthusiasts of his stamp. In addition, his paroles bring out his conceit more starkly. Brand describes the “unpardonable sin” as the “sin of the wise”, and describes himself as a “wise man” polished by passion comparing with those “crude beasts”, who completely demarcates the boundaries with those ordinary villagers. The neurotic pride fully expands Ethan Brand’s idealized image in his psychic world, which makes him mistake his ideal self for his true self.

On the basis of the neurotic pride, Ethan Brand develops his neurotic claim. He demands others to treat him in a way that is strictly consistent with the positioning of his ideal self he has constructed in his psyche(p. 132). In contrast with his expectation, his neurotic claim don’t meet with a positive response from the villagers, on the contrary, it is seriously assailed by them. The lime worker thinks Brand is just “a sinner like the rest of them, --nothing more likely”. The praise and admiration that Brand expected is not fulfilled. Psychologically, the

unsatisfied claim lead to the fragmentation of his neurotic pride and the further self-questioning of his idealized image. “You have no more found the Unpardonable Sin than yonder Joe has.” These words of the three fellows pushes Brand to the apex of self-questioning. The threats to his pride triggers his anxiety and hostility manifested in his paroles “Stay away from me!” His anger deeply exposes his inner anxiety and shows his hatred of worthlessness and ordinary. Therefore, when the reflection in the water disappears, the suppression and rejection of the real self by the ideal self makes him beyond the pale, which causes him to suffer strong psychological impact and intense psychache. Ethan Brand has to jump into the raging fire and continues to follow his idealized image and his perfect expectations.

The obstruction of Ethan Brand’s neurotic claims makes his image of pride become more vulnerable. Facing the doubt about his ideal self given by the others, Brand is eager to seek for the impetus that would allow him to perceive the real existence of the “unpardonable sin” in his heart. His idealized image provokes the emergence of the tyranny of the “shoulds”. These tyranny of the “shoulds” force Brand to think and act according to his idealized image, which is a further rejection and expulsion of his real self(Frager&Fadiman, 2017, p. 133). At that time, he recalls how he used Esther as a pure experimental tool to satisfy his inner desire as a numb and ruthless devil, and recalls how he wiped out her soul in the psychological experiment. Flowing through the psychological process of tyranny of the “shoulds”, the idealized image in Brand’s imagination has become more realistic fueling the fire of desire in his heart. The tyranny of the “shoulds” of Brand, as a spontaneous compensation for his unsatisfied neurotic claims, is both the expression of resistance to the aggression of others and the further rejection of his real self. He has been indulging in a false ideal psychological world and imprisons himself in a desert of endless self-condemnation(p. 133).

The final product of people’s psychological internal defense strategy--self-hate is hidden behind the tyranny of the “shoulds”, which is able to aggravate and amplify the sense of incompetence and failure in the psychological world(p. 133). For in one sense, Ethan Brand’s idealized image deepens his self-hate. The more he insists on the integration of the subject and the ideal self, the more he against with his real self. In other words, only when he strictly meets the requirement of his idealized image, Brand feels that he is valuable; otherwise, any other frustration will make him feel worthless, forming his “despised image”(Frager&Fadiman, 2017, p. 131). The despised image is rejected by Brand’s idealized image, but his real self contains the “despised image”. The endless contradiction between the ideal self and the real self drags Brand into the hell of self-hate and self-torture eventually.

Under the stimulation of the surrounding environment, his self-hate is completely aroused and his psychic impotence and sense of failure are continuously amplified. The Jew with the diorama becomes a catalyst for Brand’s self-hate. The working principle of the diorama is to make people see the illusory dynamic images by constantly changing the lighting effects flowing through the audience. So, Ethan Brand is “shocked backwards” when he realizes his imaginary ideal self on the blank psychological canvas is nothingness. After that, he sees that stupid dog chasing its own tail that could not possibly be attained feverishly until exhaustion. He is moved by a perception of some remote analogy between his own case and that of this self-pursuing cur. “As if one end of the ridiculous brute’s body were at deadly and most unforgivable enmity with the other”, obviously, this assessment of the dog is both an evaluation of his pursuit of the “unpardonable sin” and the manifestation of his self-hate, who

unforgivably sees his real self as the enmity of his ideal self that never exist. The contradiction between the two psychological selves and the sense of failure caused by the impact on the ideal self lead Brand to the first high ground of self-hate.

The disappointment of being manipulated by rationality and science pushes Brand to the second level of self-hate. Ethan Brand believes that the “unpardonable sin” is the rationality and science brought about by the “great leap of wisdom”. The “vast intellectual development” places him in the position of omniscience, raises him from a worker who doesn’t know a word to a pinnacle of starlight and provides a clue for him to pursuit science. Brand has already explored the inner heart of the villagers through the observation method but found nothing. Under the guidance of rationality, he gradually shifts to the experimental method, that is, the psychological experiment on Esther to explore the inner world of human beings and develops his cognitive science(Jiang, 1987, p. 57). As he has profited from the leaps of wisdom, he eagerly anchors his hopes on rationality and science, and looks forward to finding the value of life and showing him a bright future for mankind. In this way, he is blinded by rationality and science and becomes a dutiful slave of the “unpardonable sin”.

Whereas, in the process of self-reflection beside the lime furnace, recalling the changes brought about by the “unpardonable sin”, Brand is exactly disappointed with the changes of himself and the results of the “unpardonable sin”. Brand is a person who had compassion for human sins and sorrows, took the pursuit of humanities as the inspiration for his life, and explored the “unpardonable sin” with respect and beliefs. As a common people, he regards himself as a messenger to explore the sacred temple of rationality and science for mankind. However, the “great leaps of wisdom” disrupts the balance between his ration and his emotion. Not only did rationality and science fail to bring him the glory of humanity, but they suppress and expel it from him, turn him into a ruthless and indifferent person and break him away from the mutual attraction of human nature. Additionally, the “unpardonable sin” that he consigns to neither bring him any happiness nor shows him the light of human nature, instead of revealing the crisis of human nature to him, that is, the extinction of human nature and the lack of human feelings brought by rationality and science. Both Ethan Brand and Edith are caught in the manipulation of rationality and science. In contrast, Edith’s father is deeply concerned about his daughter who has been searching for her latest information. This strong emotion existing in human nature makes Brand feel guilty and ashamed, which deepens his doubt of the results of rationality and science and his self-questioning of his ideal self, thus making his self-contradiction more acute. Obviously, the changes of himself and the results of the “unpardonable sin” run in opposite with his original intention of exploring the “unpardonable sin”. In the shadow of the failure of good expectations, he attributes the destruction of Edith’s soul and the disappearance of his own humanity to himself, leading to a deepening of self-hate and a bitter psychache.

Before jumping into the abyss of pain and suffering, Brand reviews his life (DeSpelder&Strickland, 2013, p. 424). Through irony, readers can have a deeper understanding of the implication that he wants to express in his life review, that is, what he wants to protect most in his life is the simplicity, tenderness, love and compassion in his human nature and the brotherhood of human beings. Although he sighs, “O Mankind, whose brotherhood I have cast off and trampled thy great heart beneath my feet”, he still uses the

qualifier “great” to praise human emotions and modify human hearts; although he claims that the stars of heaven have led him to find reason and wisdom, the phrase “as if” denies the true value of the “unpardonable sin”, as Bartram says, “the nonsense of ‘unpardonable sin’ did not bring me any benefit”. The re-examination of the value of the “unpardonable sin” makes Brand deeply realize the fatal harms of the “unpardonable sin”. The meaning of life that Brand eventually discovers is contrary to the one constructed in his ideal self. The last straw weighs heavily on Brand’s ideal self that has already suffered multiple psychological impact. The ideal self of Ethan Brand is completely shattered. The life review doesn’t bring comfort to Brand’s soul, but delivers the final push which shoves him into the burning furnace.

“People who have suffered can not be aware of the severity of the pain when suffering, but the prolonged torture afterwards can most pierce the heart”(Hawthorne, 2018, p. 97). The death of Ethan Brand is the inevitable result of the unresolved inner nucleus conflict. The irreconcilable contradiction between his ideal self and his real self brings about his intense psychache. For eighteen years, Brand has been pursuing the “unpardonable sin” without efforts. He leaves behind the hardships on the road, the doubts and satires of his fellow villagers, and the suffering of his own heart. However, after returning, he finds that it is just a nothingness he imagined. The rising self-hatred forces Ethan Brand to return to the original state of his real self by suicide, to pursue the glory of humanity that he cherishes at the beginning, and to carry out the final self-salvation.

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