

Metaphors of Memory

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Abstract

The understanding of human memory in psychology recurrently borrows material for research from the evolving reservoir of literature. This paper seeks to assess Victorian Age of English Literature in the context of recent research in psychology.

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The human memory of the past and its association with the present becomes the bedrock of progress and advancement. In this journey, the inability of human memory to associate metaphors crucial to identity can be detrimental. The neurosis of humanity with respect to our inability to recall the glorious Past is a matter symbolically dwelt upon by literature. While scientific research undertakes to study aspects of memory from the clinical perspective, the finer aspects to this dimension are revealed through a reading of literature.

Speaking more specifically, the inability of an individual to recollect parts of his memory related to his own identity is a psychological disorder that is known as 'dissociative amnesia'. The peculiar condition serves as a popular and rather dramatically portrayed troupe used in various evolving forms of literature such as plays, novels and films. It is uncanny, however, that the recorded evidence of this phenomenon in literature seems to emerge only after the nineteenth century.

To provide context about recent research in psychology, it becomes relevant to discuss the implications of the research work done by Dr. Harrison Pope, an eminent Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School.

In 2007, Prof. Pope and his research associates conducted a survey to test their hypothesis, which essentially stated that: instances of ‘dissociative amnesia’ were not found in literature prior to the year 1800.

The team reasoned that if dissociative amnesia for traumatic events arose as a result of a natural psychological phenomenon or as an inherent condition of the brain, then literary writers would have witnessed such cases and portrayed them through their writings, much before the start of the nineteenth century. The team observed that there was a marked absence of mention of such cases before the year 1800, and this led them to conclude the probable causal understanding of ‘dissociative amnesia’ as a “culture-bound” construct in contrast to its perception as an inherent condition of the human mind.

To conduct the survey, the researchers offered a sum of one thousand US dollars to the first individual who could find a case of ‘dissociative amnesia’ borne from a traumatic event in any fictional or non-fictional text authored prior to the year 1800. The survey was carried out in three languages and was posted on more than thirty websites and discussion groups on the Internet, and was also advertised in print. The scope of the survey covered a large array of works written in several languages including English and other European languages, Latin, Greek, Arabic, Sanskrit and Chinese.

The survey did yield a few responses though the team rejected the contentions and they were adjudged cases of “forgetfulness, infantile amnesia and biological amnesia.”

(Vedantan, 1)

The survey could not illustrate any substantial text prior to the 1800s. However, it generated several nineteenth-century instances that notably include *A Tale of Two Cities*, written by Charles Dickens in 1859. The Victorian novel set in the backdrop of the French Revolution in which a significant character Dr. Manette, does not recall important aspects of his life, such as his family and his occupation, after he is unjustly imprisoned in the Bastille.

The survey also mentioned another notable Victorian novel, *Captains Courageous* written by Rudyard Kipling in 1896, in which a former minister, Penn, suffers from a disassociation of memory after enduring a devastating flood in which his family perishes. Both Penn and Dr. Manette recollect their memories later as the plot progresses.

The work that the team considered close to being the winner was the novel, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* that was written in 1782. In this work, a character, ‘Madame de Tourvel’ suffers from a memory black-out after cheating on her husband and arrives at a convent with no idea of what brought her there. Like both the male counterparts, Dr Manette and Penn, Madame de Tourvel, also recalls her memory later.

Pope and his team of researchers concluded their findings contesting that:

...the “absence of dissociative amnesia in works prior to 1800 indicates that the phenomenon is not a natural neurological function”, but rather a “culture-bound syndrome” rooted in the nineteenth century. They argued that dissociative amnesia falls into the diagnostic category “pseudo-neurological symptom” or “conversion disorder” - a condition that “lacks a recognizable medical or neurological basis.”

(Pettus,1)

Despite the above developments in research, the etiology of dissociative amnesia remains a topic of deliberation in psychology.

Psychologists often compare the observations of Pope's team to Freudian ideas on repression of memory. Freud had explained 'dissociative amnesia' as the tendency of the human mind to dissociate unpleasant traumatic experiences from the conscious mind while they continued to thrive beneath the layers of the unconscious mind. In his view, an individual suffering from this condition must have undergone an a-priori traumatic experience, that he does not recall, even though it continues to remain an influence in his unconscious memory and culminates into neurosis.

Freud's hypothesis had sparked the interest of psychologists and was followed by the so-called 'Recovered Memory Movement' that was hyped by the media. It aroused controversy over a series of court cases claiming to be victims of abuse, based upon their recovered memories. The movement inspired a number of publications but gradually dwindled away in the late 1990s, when a number of the supposed victims retracted their allegations, admitting that they had been swayed by therapeutic techniques. With the research undertaken by Prof. Pope's team, dissociative amnesia once again gained publicity frontage, yet the scientific validity of dissociative amnesia still remains unproven. (Repressed Memory, 1)

Even though the causation of 'dissociative amnesia' still remains a matter of discussion in circles of psychology, Prof. Pope's research strongly hints at the lack of illustrations of 'dissociative amnesia' in literature prior to the nineteenth century.

The research thus concluded from the objective standpoint of psychology. However, the metaphorical and figurative elements that are hallmarks of literary expression naturally stayed outside the purview of examination.

The curious question obviously is: why did the year 1800 bring about characters with a peculiar psychological condition? Such a condition had no evidence of its presence in literature prior to this turning point.

Were the characters created merely out of imagination of the authors? Though the premise of the experimental study was the consideration that literature is a reflection of real life.

Was it just a novel literary trend that led to the production of such dramatic characters? Though even then, the characters would serve some point symbolically.

The true reason for this development cannot be determined based on observation alone. Since literature connotes content based on symbolic layers of hidden meaning, a probable explanation also calls for a literary interpretation. Since the novels mentioned above are mainly works written during the Victorian age of English literature, it is logical to make interpretations in the context of this 'age' that suitably describes the socio-economic realities of England that were closely mirrored in neighbouring parts of Europe.

It is a commonly acknowledged fact that the period post the year 1800 in the history of English literature was followed by the Romantic and Victorian ages in succession. The Romantic age drew inspiration from the French Revolution and placed unforeseen importance on the primacy of representation of common people. The era was marked by a strong sense of individuality and a bold departure from the decaying disorder of conventions that survived more out of corruption than as a matter of glory.

The Victorian age continued what the Romantic age had introduced: the power of the 'common man'. Unlike the preceding ages, where man was typically a subject controlled by destiny, and by overarching social institutions like religion and monarchy, the rebel now was distinctively born free. The charter of liberty of man and his rights were a turning point in the

journey of mankind. This was the point when man realised the true worth of his own entity. No wonder this period was followed by the soaring progress of humanity.

In the successive or rather slightly overlapping period, the Victorian age, as it is termed in English literature, was a time of progress and development in general and particularly so in England. It was during this period that capitalism and industries began to rise at a sweeping speed and the 'middle-class' as it is called emerged out of the sheer ability of the common people to turn into wealthy capitalists, who owned the means of production and dislodged land-lords and even royalty from their status of sole lordship monopoly. The rapid pace of industrialisation triggered overseas exploration, trading and travel that finally fuelled the colonial enterprise in Europe. The empire of England began to expand and gradually reached its crowning glory. The period catalysed the spirit of scientific temper and people began to understand the world that they saw with realist eyes. Soon, they realised that many beliefs rooted in religion were distortions of reality. With the new-fangled liberty, people now found a voice to freely express ideas that were in opposition to orthodox conventions. The Darwinian, *Evolution of Species*, for instance, found popular support in public. The Victorian age, was thus a period of transition from the innocent belief of infantile status of man towards a maturing realisation of his strength and ability.

The period saw the power of man rise like never before. But it was also an age of doubt and disbelief, where people were grappling in an effort to realign with the loss of their belief system and embrace a new order. The caricature that Dickens presents through the character of Dr. Manette is a doctor, who represents the advancement of science. Ironically, as he faces an issue of morality in the course of the novel, he seems to lose his sense of self-hood. The obvious warning that Dickens apparently issues in an age of confusion is that stepping away from humane concerns of morality and faith would ultimately bring confusion. While humanity was progressing towards the pursuit of material possessions and

accomplishments, it was indeed at a loss, that poignantly couldn't be spelled. On the lines of Dickens, R.L. Stevenson would go further and more explicitly explain this concern in his novella, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

The representative Victorian poet, Lord Tennyson, expressed the dilemma of man caught in the struggle of faith and reason. His ideas on certain counts resound in the debate of 'destiny versus free-will'. Several of his poems evoke the imagery of an 'almighty individual' ironically set to part ways from the nestling glory of God. The distance between God and 'Man' is bound to grow and the painful loss of Memory of God becomes a recurrent motif of Tennyson's poetry. He explicitly pours the pain of his age into the opening lines of his elegiac poem, *In Memoriam*:

Strong Son of God, immortal Love,
Whom we, that have not seen thy face,
By faith, and faith alone, embrace,
Believing where we cannot prove;

Thine are these orbs of light and shade;
Thou madest Life in man and brute;
Thou madest Death; and lo, thy foot
Is on the skull which thou hast made.

(Tennyson, lines 1 to 8)

As the poem proceeds, Tennyson eventually refers to man as ‘Son of Man’ in sharp contrast to his opening address, ‘ Strong Son of God’.

The apparent sentiment of intense love for morality and spirituality in the face of change is visible in the works of other prominent Victorian poets like Mathew Arnold, who famously pours his melancholy into his poem, *Dover Beach*:

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar...
(Arnold, lines 16 to 25)

From the reflections on the temper of the Victorian age, it becomes clear that the period following the year 1800 is a hallmark that heralds the journey of man, the maturing individual, who would gradually grow more powerful but, at the same time, move further

away from his Creator. No wonder that illustrations of characters losing awareness of their self-hood become a more common motif in literature, such as in the cited illustrations of Victorian characters.

Therefore, going by the logic that literature mirrors the real phenomena of evident life and that successive generations of writers show a tendency to model their narratives based on patterns of behaviour they observe in society, it can be assumed that the preceding generations of individuals were more wholly in sync with their personalities, specifically in relation to integrating themselves to aspects of their past, specifically towards a stronger orientation with respect to humane qualities like faith, morality, spirituality, hope and trust in God. The emergence of instable patterns of human persona in literature also indicates the departure of human spirituality away from the Memory of a sacred past.

To conclude recent research in psychology indicates that it is strongly probable that illustrations of ‘dissociative amnesia’ were not present in the body of literature prior to the year 1800. The reflections of the same in Victorian literature and beyond, logically call for an assessment of the temper of the age. Man’s bold assertion of individuality and his belief in self-identity in relation to parting ways from the overarching reign of God, put forth the idea of a maturing civilisation rising to power while bemoaning the loss of infantile innocence that it leaves behind. The instances of depictions of individual loss of identity in literature go hand-in-hand with the larger story of Man’s own loss of selfhood in his journey away from the eternal source of Memory.

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